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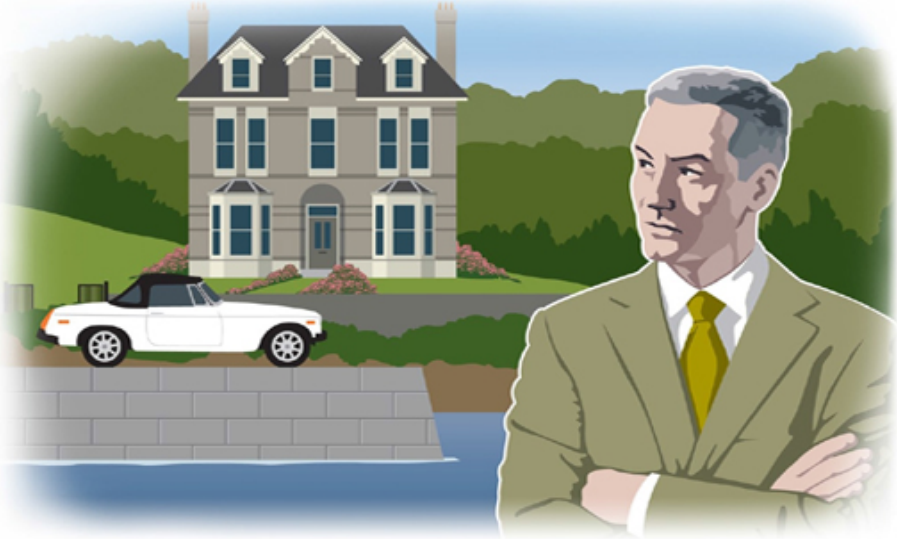

GENTLY WITH LOVE

Alan Hunter

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Alan Hunter was born in Hoveton, Norfolk in 1922. He left school at the age of fourteen to work on his father's farm, spending his spare time sailing on the Norfolk Broads and writing nature notes for the *Eastern Evening News*. He also wrote poetry, some of which was published while he was in the RAF during the Second World War. By 1950, he was running his own bookshop in Norwich. In 1955, the first of what would become a series of forty-six George Gently novels was published. He died in 2005, aged eighty-two.

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Gently with Love

Alan Hunter

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For Helen, my daughter

CHAPTER ONE

THE CASE I am about to relate is not one of my own, though in the long run I became involved in it at least as deeply as the officer concerned. It did not end in a prosecution and so I have seen fit to change the names of the people and the places. The case excited only modest publicity. It is generally believed to be unsolved.

CHAPTER TWO

SHORTLY BEFORE I was due for promotion to higher executive rank I was sent on a Senior Officers' Course to prepare me for such an elevation. At that time (the first Wilson administration had just taken office) the course was held at a country house near a town about forty miles from London. I went down by train with ten of my colleagues; we were collected by a minibus and driven through the town; at Copdock Place, as the country house was called, we were allotted rooms and told to assemble in the hall. Here we were addressed by the IC, a senior Metropolitan officer named Stapleton, who gave us a synopsis of the rather boring three weeks that were to follow; when, at the end, he shook our hands, and carefully repeated each man's name, he gave me an unusually penetrating stare and held on to my hand for a second.

'George Gently?'

'Sir.'

'How did you come to be acquainted with the aristocracy?'

I must have looked blank. 'I don't remember any acquaintances of that sort, sir.'

'Well, there's a message for you in the office from a gentleman calling himself Earl Sambrooke. He wants you to ring him. He noticed your name in the list we release to the local press.'

Earle Sambrooke: they had the spelling wrong. Sambrooke was far from being aristocracy. In fact he was a Canadian newsreader who was currently employed in the BBC's World Service. I had met him a short time before when I was on a case in which a Canadian serviceman figured; later he brought me a script about police work to vet, and we had lunch together at Aunty's expense. He was a husky, likeable young man who had done some flying with the RCAF. But I was at a loss to know why he should want me to ring him or, for that matter, what he was doing in Blockford.

I rang the number he had left.

'Earle?'

'Hello there, Superintendent!'

'What was it you wanted?'

'If you're free this evening, I would like you to meet some nice people.'

I hesitated. 'Here in Blockford?'

'Sure, right here in Blockford.'

'What sort of people?'

'The nicest. You'll find I am doing you a big favour.'

I considered this. Though my evening was free I had intended to use it settling in – getting to know the rest of the intake, sizing up Stapleton and his establishment. But doubtless there would be time for that, and meanwhile it would be pleasant to spend an evening in civilian company.

‘Have you transport?’

‘You bet. Pick you up around seven.’

‘Is this a pub crawl?’

‘No *sir.*’

‘Right. I’ll see you at seven, then.’

Promptly at seven Earle arrived, driving a hideous American car: at that time they still had a comic-strip styling and more chromium plate than an espresso bar. We drove away with a clatter of gravel that brought a frown from the watching Stapleton, and took up an improbable angle of heel as we swooped through the lodge gates. Earle was grinning.

‘You like this bus?’

‘I’d like you to ease your big foot.’

‘She’s a wedding present, fella.’

‘Whose?’

‘Mine. I’m getting married on Saturday.’

I glanced sidelong at him. His grin was blissful as he zoomed the car towards Blockford. Earle wasn’t handsome, but he had those boyish features that some women find irresistible. He had fairish hair and pale grey eyes and stood a long-legged six feet. He must have looked well in air force rig. I imagined that he had never been short of a date.

‘Who is she?’

‘She’s out of a dream. She makes Brigitte Bardot look a hundred. She is the classiest, deloveliest dame since Cleopatra and Lady Hamilton.’

‘But she has a name.’

‘Anne Mackenzie.’

‘How did you find her up in Blockford?’

‘She’s the sister of a guy I work with – Alex Mackenzie. You’ll have heard of him?’

At which point I began to catch on. I certainly had heard of Alex Mackenzie. He was the son of Colin Mackenzie, with whom I had done my early service, and with whom I had kept in touch until his death in Rhodesia. Colin had joined the Rhodesian Police. I had been the best man at his wedding; we had seen little of each other after that, but I did know that his son, Alex, had joined the BBC. Also, I remembered, I had heard of a daughter, though I had not had an opportunity to meet either of the children. I tried to recall Mrs Mackenzie, but my memory of her was vague.

‘Your name came up,’ Earle explained. ‘I was telling them about the Dupont Case. Then Anne’s mother got to wondering if you were the Gently her husband used to know. So she got out some old letters, and I recognized your handwriting straight away. Then Alex capped it by saying that your name was listed in the Police Call column of the *Blockford Herald*. So here you are – the old family friend turning up for the kid’s wedding.’

‘But I’m a perfect stranger,’ I protested. ‘I didn’t ever really know Colin’s wife.’

‘You’ll like her,’ Earle said. ‘She remembers her husband thought you were great.’

‘That was several years ago.’

‘She’ll like you anyway. She’s the easiest person to get on with. I picked myself a bride in a million and a mother-in-law to match.’

I wasn’t so sure. The eve of a wedding was perhaps not the best time for reunions

of this sort, and it occurred to me that if Mrs Mackenzie had wanted to renew our acquaintance she need not have waited till now for an opportunity. I was indeed a stranger. Before her marriage Mrs Mackenzie had lived in Devonshire. Until the wedding, at Axminster, I had never set eyes on her, and soon after she departed with her husband to Rhodesia. I had met Colin again when he was home on furlough, but Mrs Mackenzie had spent her time with her family. Colin had been dead three years. And a serving police officer is not a difficult person to contact. Well, we would see.

'I guess it's fate,' Earle smiled. 'You turning up on the doorstep like this. I've got a crazy feeling that everything is going for me. Perhaps that's what being in love is all about.'

CHAPTER THREE

WE CROSSED A bridge and turned down by the river, which is the most attractive feature of Blockford: a slow, wide stream that reminds one of the upper reaches of the Thames. The road runs beside it. On the opposite bank is a park, or pleasaunce, shaded by willows, and among the willows stands the boathouse of a rowing club, just where a footbridge crosses at an eyot. This was a bland evening in June. Several scullers were out on the river; people were strolling beneath the willows or loitering on the elegant footbridge. It was a scene so wistfully English that it somehow made me feel like a tourist: especially when seen from an American car, and past Earle's stubbornly transatlantic profile. I couldn't help wondering what he thought of it (I knew he came from Hamilton, near Toronto), or whether, if the cards fell that way, he could adapt himself to such a setting. Meanwhile, on the left, we were passing a succession of large, handsome houses, each one set behind its lawn and guarded by shrubberies and mature trees. Clearly this was patrician Blockford, a reservation of the affluent; it was not where one would expect to find living the widow of a Rhodesian police inspector. But Earle slowed the car and we turned in at one of the gateways. We crunched over raked gravel between well-shorn plots and double lines of disciplined roses. Before us spread a gracious Regency front with a wrought-iron veranda at first-floor level, and below it an ornate porch over which clematis had been trained. Earle stopped the car and turned to me.

'Now wouldn't you say this was something?'

I gave the house an appraising glance. 'About forty thousand at present values.'

'Remind me to kick you,' Earle grinned. He unbuckled his belt and sat back. 'It belonged to Anne's great-aunt. She left it to Verna. Her husband was something on the Stock Exchange.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I was wondering.'

'Oh sure,' Earle smiled. 'You're a cop. Now you're going to suspect me of marrying for money and other felonious designs. But look at this house. Couldn't you just live there and let the world pass you by? It would be bliss. That place is music. You would hear it playing all the time.'

'It would need to be your sort of music.'

'It's Mozart, the *Clarinet Concerto*. Then you look down across the river. That's when it changes into Strauss.'

'So you'll be living here.'

'Till we find a house.'

'Then you'll get to know about Regency villas,' I said dryly. 'How the floors sink and the ceilings crack and the draughts get past those sash windows.'

Earle made a face. 'It isn't like that. Verna has had it all fixed. And anyway we'll be in town most of the week. I shall keep on my flat in Notting Hill.'

'But here is where you'll be settling. In Blockford.'

‘Sure. In a house as like this one as I can get.’ He checked for a moment, then wriggled his shoulders. ‘Let’s stop gassing and join the people.’

CHAPTER FOUR

WE WENT IN. Mrs Mackenzie came out into the hall to greet us. I would not have recognized her as the smooth-cheeked West Country girl who had married Colin just before the war. I remembered her as plump, but now she was slim, a point underlined by a costly black dress, and hair which I remembered as bushy and faintly auburn now was dark brown and elaborately styled. The girl had become a sophisticated woman. She wore heavy but perfectly managed make-up. It did not quite conceal the fine seaming of her features which doubtless was a legacy of her years in Rhodesia. She took my hand.

'George – at last! You've changed, but I think I would have remembered you. Colin had your photograph hanging in his office, but it got lost when we came back to England.'

'I wrote to you when I heard of his death.'

'I don't think we can have received your letter. But it was all so confused about then, I didn't really know what was happening.'

'It must have been a shock.'

'I was prostrate. Alex and Anne were both in England. Fortunately we had some good friends out there who saw me through and took care of everything.'

She touched a handkerchief to her eye, though taking care not to smudge her make-up. She smiled bravely for my approval. I felt that now we could dismiss Colin.

'May I call you Verna?'

'Oh, please do. I hate my friends to be formal.'

'This must be a busy time for you.'

'Come and meet the children. Earle, I'll let you pour the drinks.'

She led us into the lounge. Alex Mackenzie rose from a chair to be introduced. He was a young man of solid build with dark hair and eyes, in whose features I could find no trace of his father. For that matter he was unlike his mother too, but I assumed it was from her side that he got his looks: there was a suggestion of Devonshire in his bold, oval face with its firm, dimpled chin and strongly marked brows. He had been to Oxford and it showed in his speech. His manner was polite rather than cordial; but he took my hand with a pleasant smile and a friendly degree of pressure.

'Where is Anne?' his mother asked.

'She slipped out to the study to phone.'

'Wouldn't she just! Who was she phoning?'

Alex gave a disclaiming shrug.

'My daughter is a sad girl,' Mrs Mackenzie sighed. 'Oh, I know you won't agree, Earle. You've been dazzled. But just you wait. Your eyes will be opened after Saturday.'

‘Then I surely will close them again,’ Earle smiled, offering her a drink from a silver salver. ‘It’s no use your knocking her now, Verna. The damage is done. You have a son-in-law.’

Mrs Mackenzie took her drink but her expression betrayed displeasure. I found myself wondering if she was less than delighted with the prospect of Earle’s marrying her daughter. Canada is still a long way from Blockford, and Earle might well change his plan of settling in England. He was young; the adventure of exile has a habit of wearing thin when long indulged in. I looked at Alex, who was smiling faintly, as though he remembered something that amused him: I sensed that there had been family discussions. I wondered which side Alex was on.

But then Anne entered and at once I was in a presence that truly recalled Colin. Nobody who had known the father could be in doubt about the daughter. She had his fair hair and his blue eyes and his purely Scottish cast of feature, with high and slightly prominent cheekbones and a hint of freckles about the nose. She had too his long-limbed frame and his easy, light carriage; but more than this: she had his shy haughtiness that I knew would dissolve into a roguish smile. It did; it was almost a shock. I might have been shaking hands with the young Colin. I could even hear, very faintly limned, a ghost of his brogue in her soft, well-educated voice.

‘So you are the friend Daddy used to talk about.’

I nodded, still taken aback.

‘He said that you were an intuitive with a marked capacity for thought.’

I chuckled. I could hear him saying it.

‘Would you say he was right?’

‘Of course. He was a Scot.’

‘You had better qualify that as a compliment.’

‘How can one qualify an ultimate?’

‘Yes,’ she nodded. ‘I *think* Daddy was right.’

‘George is a lulu,’ Earle put in. ‘You had better watch what you say to him, honey. He’s the trained brain from Mindsville.’

Anne flashed him a look that I couldn’t interpret; it was a look with energy but of equivocal content. Then she took the drink from the salver he was still holding and impulsively touched it to mine.

‘To auld lang syne.’

‘That’s my girl,’ Earle said.

‘Well, now we are introduced,’ Mrs Mackenzie said brightly. ‘Do drink up. We must go in to dinner, because I promised to let the help leave early.’

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DINNER WAS simple but excellent and accompanied by a suitable choice of wine. We ate in a room in the front of the house with windows that faced the lawn and the river. The windows were open. From the shrubberies outside came the evensong of the birds. From the river we could hear now and then the dip and clunk of passing oars. It was very relaxing. I wished that Colin could have been there to enjoy that affluent haven. I would have liked to learn some more about his death but it was not a subject that I could introduce and our conversation was naturally channelled toward the happy event on Saturday. It was, I found, to be a quiet affair at the local Registry Office. This was not Verna's choice, nor even Earle's, but had been insisted on by Anne. A few friends had been invited from the BBC, where Anne too had worked for a while, a few Blockford acquaintances, mostly Verna's, and Verna's mother, who was travelling up from Axminster. And now, of course, myself, who fitted into no category, except that in a curious way I could feel them regarding me as, in some sort, the absent Colin's representative. So I asked a natural question.

'Won't any of Colin's people be coming?'

From the short silence that followed I understood that I had put my foot in it. Alex answered me.

'They live rather far off to invite to an informal occasion.'

'In Scotland?'

Alex smiled politely. 'Sutherland. It takes two days to get here.'

'Scots don't mind travelling in a good cause.'

'We thought it was a bit much to expect.'

'So in fact we didn't invite them,' Anne said tartly. 'After all, we did want it to be a quiet wedding.'

I glanced at Verna: Verna was frowning. 'All right, you may as well know,' she said. 'I've never hit it off with Colin's people, that's why they haven't been invited.' Nervously she twisted one of her rings. 'I forgot to write to them about Colin. I didn't mean to, but there was so much to do, it wasn't as though it happened in England.'

I ghosted a shrug. 'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, there's no reason to make a mystery of it. But the truth is that we've had no contact with them since I came back to England. Not that I saw much of them before. I went on a visit once with Colin. They didn't approve of me. The children have been up there, but not since the row after Colin's death.'

'They may like to know about the wedding.'

Verna gave the ring a wrench. 'Then it's up to someone else to tell them. After our last exchange of letters they won't be expecting it from me.'

'I'll tell them,' Anne said quickly. 'I know how to handle Grandad Mackenzie.'

'But please, no invitations,' her mother said. 'It's probably too late, but you never know.'

So that was that: and a little saddening, in view of Colin's attachment to his family. They had all come down for his own wedding and they had made a strong impression on me. James Mackenzie, his father, was skipper and owner of a trawler; a tall, romantic-featured man, with – it was unusual at that time – long, flowing hair. Since the wedding was an important family occasion he had donned Highland jacket and kilt, and altogether cut a striking figure in the sleepy Devonshire town. I recalled his ringing Gaelic greeting and the warm embrace he gave his son, and the pride in Colin's voice as he presented me to his father. They loved each other. Verna's neglect must have given James Mackenzie mortal offence. On the whole I could sympathize with her wish to avoid a confrontation with her formidable father-in-law. He would be in his seventies now but still, I imagined, hale and strong, and perhaps not the less awe-inspiring for his grey locks and matured authority. His wife, who was younger than himself, had been a handsome woman in 1938, and had shown herself in no way behind him in her affection for Colin. With them had come Colin's elder brother, Iain, who was mate on the trawler, and his sister, Marie, whom I must confess I greatly fancied. I wondered what had happened to them all in the intervening years but it was plain that the present occasion was not to gratify my curiosity.

We returned to the lounge for our coffee. Alex and Earle talked of their work; Anne, who was sitting a little apart, seemed as engrossed as they with the subject. I sat by Verna. On a stand by the window I had noticed a piece of native carving, and I decided to use it as a lever to bring Colin back into the conversation: I pointed to it.

'Your husband always had a weakness for picking up junk.'

'Oh, that.' Verna glanced at it indifferently. 'You can buy them for nothing in the bazaars in Salisbury.'

'I expect you had lots of them.'

She frowned. 'It was Colin's taste, not mine. His den in the bungalow was choc-a-bloc with them, each one labelled with the tribe it came from. But of course, I couldn't bring them all back. Anne brought that one for a souvenir. The rest were sold at the auction. It was a rush at the end.'

'Did Colin like Rhodesia?'

'He loved the country. He was a bit stuffy about the administration. You knew Colin. He wasn't above offending people if they didn't think quite as he did.'

'What exactly was he doing when he was killed?'

'He was sent on a pacification mission.'

'A dangerous job?'

'Yes.' She made a mouth. 'They probably sent him on it to get rid of him.'

I hesitated. 'Who?'

'I told you he wasn't above offending people.'

She rose abruptly to take my cup, when I became aware of Anne's blue eyes regarding me. Again I felt a sensation of shock: it was so like looking up and catching Colin's eye. But there was no smile in the eyes that met mine, just that intent, impenetrable gaze. It was I who had to smile. Then she responded and looked away.

'Of course,' Verna said firmly, 'there is a certain advantage in having a son in the BBC. He gets to know such interesting people. He brings them down with him at the weekend.'

I received my cup without enthusiasm: there was a lot more that I would have

liked to ask about Colin. But Verna was determined to have done with him and to put the conversation on a general footing.

'Last week, for example – what was his name? An attaché from the Brazilian Embassy. Then there was the couple who sailed here from Australia, and a very charming American professor. We get all sorts. You mustn't think we're out of the swim here at Blockford.'

Alex smiled indulgently. 'They come here mostly to meet Verna. My glamorous mother. The word goes round. Everyone wants to come down to meet her.'

'Oh nonsense, Alex! Don't tease.'

'But it's the truth,' Alex laughed. 'Ask Earle. Señor Alfonso came here after seeing your photograph on my desk.'

'You're making it up.'

'Not a bit. He saw your photograph and fell.'

'When he was here he was simply polite.'

'Ah, but that's how Latin lovers begin.'

Verna's eyes were bright. 'I don't believe a word of it! He simply came for a quiet weekend. And don't annoy me with your foolishness in front of George – he doesn't know you, he might believe it.' But she didn't look offended. 'In any case, I prefer your people. That's how we first got to know Earle. There are delightful people at the BBC.'

'Thank you, Verna,' Earle said.

'We do our best for the image,' Alex said archly.

'We surely do,' Earle chorused. 'Even us colonials out of the hills.'

Verna turned to me. 'They have one thing in common, the people whom Alex invites down. They have talent. They are all people whom it is stimulating to be with. You feel they have an urge for life. It's the same whatever they may be doing – acting, writing scripts, or organizing programmes, like Alex. I can't remember him inviting anyone whom I wasn't delighted to entertain.'

'Except perhaps just one,' Anne said softly.

Verna gave her a sharp look. 'Not one. I don't know who you are thinking of, but they have all been charming when they were here.'

'She's thinking of me,' Earle said smilingly. 'I don't have talent. I'm just the voice of Canada.'

'She's thinking of Nigel Fortuny,' Alex said quickly. 'And if you don't mind we'll change the subject.'

Verna bit her lip. There was nothing playful in Alex's expression now. The young man's mouth was small and his dark eyes were averted. Anne, too, was looking vexed, and Earle's ready smile had faded. Someone else had put their foot in it, and this time nobody ventured an explanation.

Verna hastened to smooth it over. 'I know,' she exclaimed. 'Let's have some music! Earle does have talent – he plays the piano. And Alex sings very well, in a camp-fire way.'

CHAPTER SIX

EARLE PLAYED AT the Eavestaff miniature and Alex sang 'Spanish Ladies' and The 'Foggy, Foggy Dew'. They had clearly performed together before and they gave an energetic rendition. Then Earle played 'Beer-Barrel Polka' in the clowning style of Chico Marx, and Verna requested 'Green Grow the Rushes' and other songs in which we could join. Finally, to my surprise, Earle shed his casual style and gave us Grieg's *Piano Concerto* – performed a little flashily, perhaps, but as far as I could tell without a wrong note. We sat listening in complete stillness as that rhapsodic music trilled from his fingers. Alex sat by the piano, watching Earle's hands, Verna was gazing out of the window. Anne's eyes were intent on Earle's face, which was set in a frown of concentration: there was a yearning fondness in her expression that had almost the intensity of suffering. I had no doubt of her feeling for him. Though she treated him coolly she was very much in love. And about Earle's sincerity I had no doubt either: they seemed a couple destined for each other. And yet there was something disturbing about Anne's gaze that I was at a loss to account for, a certain nervous tenseness: it might have been interpreted as apprehension. I reproved myself. I didn't know Anne; clearly she was a difficult person to read. When I knew her better I would doubtless understand the subtle nuances that puzzled me now. When the music ended and we congratulated Earle, Anne kissed him briefly on the temple, and Earle hugged her waist for a moment and brushed her hair with his lips.

I left early to avoid trespassing too far on Commander Stapleton's patience. Earle chatted to me blithely as we skimmed back through the June twilight. His was a happy disposition and he seemed to have no care in the world. His only concern was because his father would be unable to make the trip from Toronto for the wedding. But that too had its compensation. He would be taking Anne to Canada in September; and surely the fall was the time, of all others, to introduce her to his native land. Meanwhile they were spending the honeymoon in France, driving southwards as the mood took them.

'I guess I'm a lucky guy,' Earle concluded, as he halted the Pontiac at Copdock Place. 'Not the cleverest, but the luckiest. Why else would Anne have fallen for me?'

I smiled. 'You're certainly a happy man. And not many people can say that.'

He laughed delightedly. 'I really *am* happy. I feel I want to share it with all the world.'

I felt an impulse to ask him about Nigel Fortuny whose name had cast that sudden shadow, but I decided that it would be unfair to interrupt such a mood of bliss.

He wrung my hand. 'Till Saturday, fella. Get round to Verna's at the earliest.'

'Till Saturday, Earle.'

He waved gaily and drove flamboyantly away.

I watched his tail-lights wink and vanish and then I went up to my room. Lying on my bed was a sheaf of notes with 'For your earliest attention' inscribed upon it. I

turned the leaves. It was matter calculated to inspire me with higher-executive principles. I put it in a drawer out of harm's way, smoked a pipe, and went to bed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT IS THE practice of policemen to write down the details of incidents as soon as possible after they occur (and if ever you are the subject of any such incident you may be advised to do the same). But of course I did not do this after the evening I spent at Verna's, and it is possible that the account I have given above is a little inflected by hindsight. If I had indeed made notes that night I would probably have given more space to Verna. I spent much of the evening trying to read through her the sort of life that Colin had led. Apparently they had not been too compatible and her sense of loss was not overwhelming. At the same time I did not think that Colin had been gravely unhappy with her. Verna was a realist. If she hadn't loved Colin, at least she would have arranged to live with him amicably, and because I felt certain of that I felt also a degree of gratitude towards her. She'd done her best. If her best wasn't love, it was as much as many men would settle for. Verna would have run a happy home and have presented a cheerful face. And love there had been: it had come from Anne: that was another thing I had read. About Alex I wasn't so certain, though I could imagine him having an affectionate respect for his father. But Anne had been close to him. She was a Mackenzie. I had the picture of Colin and James Mackenzie before me. Just so she would have run to be hugged by her father, with just such pride have introduced a friend. The grief at his death had been Anne's grief, of which that of the others had been a pale shadow. And now, happily, that love had been transferred to a mate who I felt persuaded would not betray it; and who, though perhaps he would never realize it, was the lucky beneficiary of a man he had not known. If Colin's marriage had not been ideal, he had yet paved the way for his daughter's happiness. Verna, for her part, wanted to forget Colin, and I could not find it in my heart to blame her. She was young enough to begin again and it would be unreasonable to expect her to condemn herself to widowhood. One day an Alfonso or a professor would come along to supply the companionship she ardently needed, and Verna would commence a fresh chapter of felicity with no pangs or regrets for what went before. Alex, I judged, was happy in his career, and no doubt would prosper to his mother's satisfaction; he too would find a mate, among his colleagues or their families, and give an opportunity for such a wedding as Verna was being denied by Anne.

So it was an agreeable picture that I was left contemplating in my somewhat bleak bedroom, and which I preferred to take with me to bed rather than that sheaf of edifying information. But then, I had my own ideas about the executive rank to which I was being summoned.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE FOLLOWING MORNING was spent in lectures on administrative procedure, a necessary branch of knowledge but one that it is tedious to acquire. The second session of the afternoon, however, was devoted to the role of the Central Office, and since I might be regarded as qualified in the subject I applied for, and obtained, leave of absence. It had occurred to me that Colin's daughter rated a wedding present from his old friend; I caught a bus at the lodge gate and was set down in Blockford High Street.

It was the busy time of the afternoon and the pavements were crowded. I was jostled as I peered into windows, trying to surprise inspiration. Wedding presents are a puzzle. They must be either useful or delightful. The one involves a knowledge of the recipients' needs and the other a knowledge of their tastes. I thought I had better opt for the second, with which I was slightly more conversant, and found my way to an antique shop, in which I could see some pictures. One I liked. It was an anonymous watercolour to which I put a provisional date of 1820, very much English School of the period, though depicting a French landscape with a village and peasants: Prout, perhaps. I enquired the price. It was well within my means; but I had time to look further so I told the dealer that I would think about it.

Then, pushing out into the crowds again, I caught sight of Anne across the street. Here was luck! I could show her the picture and ask her whether she liked it. She had just left an official-seeming red-brick building with a brass plate on the portal, and was standing looking rather dazed by the sunlight and by the people who were thronging past her. But, as I waited impatiently for a gap in the traffic, I was concerned to see her sway slightly, and I noticed for the first time that her face was unusually pale. I made a suicidal dash across the street and caught her by the arm.

'Anne! Are you all right?'

She stared at me as though I were a stranger. The pupils of her eyes were small and there was a mist of perspiration on her forehead. With an effort she gathered herself.

'Oh . . . yes! But I felt faint for a moment.'

'I'll find you somewhere to sit down.'

'No, please. I'm better now.'

'You're in a tremble. You look like a ghost.'

'It was just coming out into this rush. It made me go dizzy. But I'm quite all right now.'

I didn't believe her. There was a Kardomah Coffee Shop a couple of doors down the street. I assisted her into it, and we were fortunate in finding a vacant table in a window-corner. I grabbed a waitress and ordered some tea. Anne sat trembling on her chair. I took out my handkerchief and patted her brow, but she feebly put my hand away.

‘Don’t. People are staring at us.’

‘I think I’ll get a taxi and take you home.’

‘No.’ She struggled to sit straighter. ‘I shall be all right if I can just sit here.’

‘You nearly fainted, you know.’

‘It was silly. I’ll soon get over it.’

‘Has this ever happened to you before?’

‘No. And I swear it won’t happen again.’

I gave her a keen look. A hint of colour was certainly creeping back into her cheeks. She caught my eye with an attempt at her roguish, confiding smile. The waitress came. I poured a cup with a little milk and a lot of sugar. Anne sipped it. In a little while the cup ceased to tremble. She found my eye again, nervously.

‘You know, you’re behaving very properly.’

I grinned. ‘You gave me quite a fright back there.’

‘When I was a kid I had malaria. I was fibbing when I said it hadn’t happened before. But not very often. Earle knows about it. It’s just a last kick from the bug.’

‘All the same I would sit quiet for a bit.’

‘But I’m better now, really.’ She giggled. ‘I wonder if these people think you’re my uncle, or that I’m carrying on with a married man.’

‘Neither.’

‘You don’t know women. Half of them are betting that I’m the girlfriend.’

‘Then stop acting like it.’

‘Don’t be stuffy. They would change places with me if they could.’

I refilled her cup. I sensed something false in this little spurt of gaiety. She was looking more herself, yet I couldn’t help wondering if she was being entirely frank with me. I thought that perhaps I ought to get that taxi and see her home and have a word with Verna. But then I found her gazing straight at me, almost as though I had spoken my thoughts aloud.

‘Let’s get out into the air. I’m beginning to find this place close.’

‘Are you sure you’ve recovered?’

‘I never felt better. I know, we’ll take a stroll in St Cuthbert Gardens.’

She rose determinedly, so I paid for the tea and followed her into the street. St Cuthbert Gardens was a pleasant spot near one of Blockford’s churches. It was surrounded by tall limes, through which peered the grave tower of the church, and its several walks wound through shrubberies of rhododendrons and azaleas, now in bloom. Anne found a bench in view of the church and with a prospect of the riotous blossoms. We sat and for some moments she stared in silence at the brilliant display. Then she sighed.

‘Last night. You wanted to talk about Daddy, didn’t you?’

I hid my surprise. ‘It perhaps wasn’t the time to dwell on a painful subject.’

‘It isn’t painful to me. I like to talk about him. It seems to make him still alive. I don’t think that people ever die really, not people like Daddy. He isn’t dead to me.’ There was a quiver in her voice.

‘People stay alive in those who loved them.’

‘Yes,’ she said eagerly. ‘That’s true. Daddy is still alive in me. Then he will keep staying alive in the people I am loved by. Death isn’t real at all. It just doesn’t make any difference.’

‘I used to know your father well.’

‘Oh please. Tell me about him.’

I smiled. ‘I was rather hoping that I would hear about him from you.’

‘But you knew him when he was younger. He must have been a wonderful person then. And that’s the part I can never know, it’s just some old photographs in an album.’

‘Well,’ I paused. ‘He was very like you.’

‘Go on.’

‘You could guess where he came from before he spoke. He had an air, half shy and half friendly. You felt his sincerity was absolute.’

‘Yes,’ she breathed. ‘He didn’t change. That’s Daddy as I always knew him. And he had a special laugh, do you remember that? The way his eyes wrinkled when he smiled?’

‘He had the driest sense of humour.’

‘Oh yes!’

‘I have never known him out of temper. He was a kindly man who enjoyed helping people. I’m sure he would have approved of Earle.’

She nodded but said nothing, and her eyes sank to her lap. I could see her hands creep together and suddenly clasp tight.

‘I haven’t known Earle for long,’ I said. ‘But I’m supposed to be a professional at assessing character. And if you were my daughter I would give you my blessing. I think you two are lucky to have found each other.’

She gave me a quick, grateful look, but then resumed the study of her lap.

‘Of course, he comes from another country,’ I continued. ‘And that may present a problem one day. He may grow homesick, or his career may make it necessary for him to return. Then you will have a decision to make. But I’m sure you’ll be able to work it out. Verna will be the difficulty. You must give her plenty of time to get used to the idea.’

I hesitated. The knuckles of Anne’s hands showed white. There was something at once tense and yet oddly forlorn about her droop-headed figure.

‘You do love him, don’t you?’

‘Oh, yes!’

‘You don’t feel that you’re being rushed into this thing?’

She shook her head, facing me now. ‘I love him and I always shall.’

‘But you’re upset.’

‘It’s because you’re so kind. You’re talking to me like Daddy would. And I don’t deserve it, really – I don’t deserve any of this!’ She began to sob. ‘We quarrelled,’ she said. ‘Oh, it’s over and done with now. But about that. Him going back to Canada. And he changed his plans all because of me.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘Please, it isn’t your fault,’ she sobbed.

‘If he changed his plans it proves he loves you.’

‘You don’t understand.’ She sobbed bitterly.

I glanced round the Gardens. This certainly did seem my afternoon for awkward moments. Fortunately, nobody was in our immediate vicinity, and Anne was sobbing quite quietly. I produced my rejected handkerchief again and this time she made use of it. I let her cry. At least, I understood that she had emotions that needed this vent.

Eventually the sobs grew less frequent and then she blew her nose with vigour. I had lit my pipe, and I continued to smoke silently while she administered a few last dabs. She sniffed once or twice.

‘I’m ashamed of myself.’

I shrugged and blew a ring.

‘Everyone is so kind. I don’t know what ails me. All I have to do is be happy.’

‘Getting married is an emotional time.’

‘I know, but usually I’m so phlegmatic. Earle would never believe I’d blubbered in public, it just isn’t like me at all.’

‘Are you quite sure that you don’t have a problem?’

‘I—’ She hesitated, frowning at the flowers. ‘You see, I’ve missed having someone like you to talk to, someone older. Like Daddy.’

‘You know you can talk to me in confidence.’

She nodded. ‘I wish . . . I wish I’d met you earlier. But it’s been good for me, just talking like this. I feel it’s helped me to see things straighter.’

‘You love each other. Nothing else matters.’

She gave me a forced little smile. ‘No. I’ll hang on to that. It’s the only real religion for women.’ She rose hastily. ‘I must fly, or Verna will wonder where I’ve got to.’ She checked. ‘You won’t come back with me, will you? There’s just Verna and me. The boys are in town.’

‘I can’t. I have an evening lecture.’

‘That’s a pity.’ She held out her hand. ‘I’m very grateful, George. Please remember that. I think I needed to run into you just now.’

As she hurried away I remembered the picture. but it was too late to call her back. She disappeared, half-running, among the rhododendrons: I found myself involuntarily shaking my head.

CHAPTER NINE

I BOUGHT THE picture. When I got it back to my room I unwrapped it and propped it up on my dressing table. It introduced a note of reproachful nostalgia to that spare and impersonal lodging. In 1820 God was in his heaven. People knew how to paint and what to think. They thought in terms of Improvement rather than of Progress and they were content to cultivate what they had. They produced houses like Verna's and pictures like this, which opened silent windows on a dreaming peace, and they viewed the world as an inexhaustible mystery beyond which was a universe fitting only for speculation. So I mused as I sat looking at the picture that I had bought in the antique shop at Blockford, the shop opposite the red-brick building from which I had seen Anne emerge. Of course I had glanced at its brass plate: the red-brick building was a doctor's surgery. But the reasons are many for visiting doctors' surgeries in these, our more dynamic, more progressive times.

CHAPTER TEN

THE NEXT DAY was Friday (the course had begun in mid-week), and I knew that Earle and Alex would be down in the evening. Whether it affronted the conventions or not, Earle was spending his last bachelor night under Verna's roof. The wedding was to take place at eleven the next morning, followed by the reception at a hotel; then the young couple were driving to Folkestone to catch the hover-ferry to Calais. During the dull morning session my thoughts kept straying to the house by the river. I could picture the two women surrounded by Anne's trousseau, which they would be packing in brand-new suitcases. No doubt Anne was nervous; she might cry again. I imagined that Verna would deal with her briskly. And the packing, that would go slowly and reverently, with now and then a break to phone a last-minute message. Then, at the other end, I could picture Earle going about his business with suppressed impatience, longing to get that day over and to launch his new Pontiac towards Blockford. They would be ribbing him and drinking healths; he would probably have a call booked to his father; that in turn would lead to his ringing Anne and to one more interruption of the packing. Ah, young love! I caught Commander Stapleton staring at me oddly on a couple of occasions. I suspect that my face wore a stupid simper that didn't quite go with executive aspirations.

At lunchtime I thought I would ring Verna and add my own contribution to the countdown. There was a pay-box in the hall and I inserted a coin and dialled her number.

'Hello, Verna. George.'

'Oh!' She sounded less than enchanted. 'I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you, George. I thought it might be Anne.'

'Isn't she with you?'

'No, she isn't, and I don't know where she's got to. Apparently she went out when I was having my bath, and we haven't set eyes on her since. It's too bad.' There was a slight inflection of hysteria in Verna's voice. 'Earle has just rung up and I didn't know what in the world to tell him.'

'But didn't she leave a message?'

'No.'

'Haven't you spoken to her this morning?'

'How could I have done? She had gone before I came down to breakfast. Madge, that's the help, made her some tea, and then she must have gone out straight away. And with so much to do – oh, it's irresponsible! That girl needs a good shake.'

I was silenced. This was a long way from the happy idyll I had been contemplating! And I could tell from Verna's voice that she was more worried than she cared to admit. I remembered yesterday. I had persuaded myself to write that off as pre-nuptial nerves; but now I wondered guiltily if I had not been too eager to accept the most convenient explanation.

‘How was she last night?’

‘Absolutely normal. We were ironing some undies she’s taking with her. Then Earle rang, and Alex rang me. Afterwards we watched a play on TV.’

‘She didn’t mention any problems?’

‘What problems?’

I shrugged to myself. ‘It’s an emotional time. She might be feeling run down, have some anxieties about her health.’

Verna snorted. ‘She’s as healthy as a horse. Alex is the one who has ailments. Anne takes after Colin. She has never been ill in her life.’

‘Didn’t she have malaria?’

‘Not her. You can put those ideas out of your head.’

‘Well, I met her yesterday, as she will have told you, and she seemed a little off-colour then.’

Verna paused. ‘But she didn’t tell me.’

‘Not that she met me in town?’

‘No. She said she was going to the library to hand in her books.’

‘She may have done that too. We met by accident.’

This time Verna’s pause was longer. ‘I don’t like it. Why didn’t she tell me that she had met you – what was so unusual about that?’

‘Nothing, probably.’

‘She isn’t usually secretive.’

‘I expect she has a lot on her mind just now. She certainly seemed nervous. It may be just that she feels a need to be alone for a while.’

‘Then why couldn’t she have said so?’

‘If she works like Colin she is liable to do a thing on impulse.’

‘But suppose she isn’t back by this evening, what in heaven’s name shall I say to Earle?’

We were interrupted by the pips. I sorted out another coin while Verna lamented peevishly. I fed it in. At the other end I could hear her breathing impatiently.

‘Look, George, I’m really worried. I’ve been sitting here getting all sorts of ideas. I was on the point of ringing the police when you called. I was sure it was going to be Anne.’

I clicked my tongue sympathetically. ‘That’s understandable. But I don’t think I would bother the police just yet, Verna. I’m pretty certain that Anne will turn up before long and she wouldn’t thank you for setting the police on her.’

‘Well, she deserves it, that’s all I can say. She must have known how it would upset me. And I really can’t face Earle if she isn’t here. George, you’ll have to come over and help me.’

I hesitated: this had all the makings of a family row. There was an edge in Verna’s voice that suggested she would not be restrained by any deference to tomorrow’s occasion. Anne had acted rashly: she was going to pay for it. She had betrayed a streak of her father’s nature. Perhaps I owed it to him and to her to be an emotional buffer-stop that evening.

‘She loves Earle, you know.’

‘What has that got to do with it?’

‘I don’t think she’ll be missing when he arrives. And no doubt some time on her own will be good for her. Perhaps we should indulge her for this once.’

Verna made impatient noises. ‘Can I rely on you or not?’

‘I’ll come over as soon as I can.’

‘Good,’ she said. And hung up.

I hung up too, but I lingered a few moments to digest what Verna had told me. I tried to fathom why Anne should have lied to me about having had malaria and fits of weakness. When I had come across her she had been in shock, I had no doubt of that now, and from my observation of her I didn’t think it was because she had just learned some serious news about her health. About that I could hazard a simple conjecture, but it scarcely fitted a state of shock. What I had seen in her eyes was awareness of a crisis that at that moment she was finding insupportable. Had it to do with the quarrel she spoke of? I thought not. The quarrel apparently was a thing of the past, and I suspected that she had only mentioned it to me at all to explain her tears and to allay curiosity. Well, I would have to wait; perhaps that evening would explain the mystery. And meanwhile it was an opportunity to deliver my wedding present, so I went up to my room and rewrapped it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I FELT NO great urge to arrive at Verna's and I ate my tea and dressed in leisurely fashion. Then, at seven, I caught the bus, and rode into town with the picture on my knees. The bus dropped me at the bridge. It was another fine evening when all seemed well in the best possible of worlds. I couldn't help indulging in a few optimistic thoughts as I strolled unhurriedly beside the river. By now Anne must have returned. She would have endured the first flush of Verna's resentment. There had been explanations and, in tears, mother and daughter had been reconciled. The mystery, if there was one, had been cleared up, and a new and more tender understanding established. Earle had arrived to find Anne radiant. It remained but for me to share their joy.

So I was smiling when I arrived at the door and pulled the bell to wake melodious chimes. And I was wrong. Alex answered the door; one look at his face and I knew the news was bad.

'Anne has cleared out.'

He drew me into the hall and closed the door behind us. His face was tight and pale and his dark eyes a-glitter.

'You mean she hasn't come back?'

'Worse than that. She left a note in Earle's room. The wedding is off. She won't marry him. She took a suitcase packed with clothes.'

He made a helpless, exasperated gesture and stood aside for me to enter the drawing room. I was stunned: but this was incredible! For almost anything else I had been prepared. I found Verna weeping on the settee and Earle sitting rigidly by the window. His face was turned from us; he had the posture of a man who has felt suddenly the pain of a mortal sickness. Neither took any notice of me. I stood foolishly, holding the picture. Alex went grimly about pouring me a drink and I laid the picture down to take it.

'But . . . what reason did she give?'

Alex groaned. 'She just says she can't marry him.'

'Can't?'

'It usually means won't. I can think of no other interpretation.'

'But she loves Earle.'

'Does she? Then this is a queer way of showing it.'

'I think there must be a valid reason.'

Alex merely grunted.

Involuntarily I sipped the drink. Yesterday's encounter flashed accusingly through my mind. Yes, there was much more than disinclination in this unlikely behaviour of Anne's. Too late I was recognizing her outburst as the symptom of some unresolvable quandary. I should have been astuter. Now I caught the appeal in that invitation for me to return home with her.

‘Where has she gone?’

‘She wasn’t kind enough to say.’

‘Surely you can guess about that.’

‘I don’t know and I don’t care,’ Alex said savagely. ‘For me, my sister can go to the devil. There is no excuse for what she’s done. She has made two people utterly miserable. She has behaved like a heartless bitch and the further she stays away from me the better.’

‘She may need help.’

‘She should have thought of that.’

‘I have reason to think she could be in trouble.’

‘Then it’s no more than she deserves and I hope it brings home to her what she’s done.’

‘It was so unnecessary!’ Verna wailed. ‘She let us do everything, arrange everything. I had even sewn bows on all her underwear. And now to go off without even explaining!’

‘Had she any money?’

‘Oh God, I don’t know. I dare say she had some in the bank.’

‘How much?’

‘Does it matter? I know she saved some when she was working.’

‘Oh, she’d have money,’ Alex sneered. ‘She’s not such a fool as to run off penniless. And when that’s finished she can work for some more, because neither I nor mother will help her.’

‘But suppose she isn’t capable of work.’

‘Then she’ll have to get it from the man she’s run off with.

I glanced at him sharply. ‘Is there any evidence of that?’

‘What else can one think?’ Verna wailed.

I shook my head. I knew better; I knew that Anne would not have deceived Earle. She had told me quite a few fibs but she had not been fibbing when she said she loved him. And if Anne had been vacillating between two men she would have let them know where they stood. She was Colin’s daughter, she would have acted openly; and having made her choice she would have stuck to it. I turned to the window.

‘Earle.’

He looked round slowly, his eyes without focus.

‘What happened, Earle?’

He stared wretchedly and gave a dull shake of his head.

‘Listen,’ I said. ‘I met Anne yesterday. She had just left a doctor’s surgery. She was upset and very pale. What can you tell us about that?’

I heard Verna draw a quick breath. Earle’s eyes rounded slightly. It took a few moments for my words to sink in but when they did he jumped to his feet.

‘Are you saying she’s sick?’

‘I’m asking you.’

‘You said she was looking pale and upset.’

‘But that may well have been due to shock.’

‘Shock! What shock?’

I shrugged deliberately and said nothing.

‘Oh, you dumb Canadian!’ Verna wailed. ‘Finding yourself pregnant is a hell of a shock.’

‘Pregnant!’ Earle echoed. He stared bemusedly at Verna. ‘But that’s crazy. We

never fooled around like that.'

'It doesn't take much fooling around.'

'But it's crazy all the same! Anne wants to have children – we both want them. She wouldn't have been shocked, she'd have been delighted.'

'Finding out could still have been a shock,' I said. 'Perhaps she'd only gone in for a check-up.'

Earle dropped back on the chair. 'No. It's screwy. It couldn't have happened, you can take my word for it.'

Verna rose with a gleam in her eye. 'This is one thing we can settle. Dr Gurney is a personal friend of mine. He'll soon tell us what she's been up to.'

'It wasn't a Dr Gurney.'

'Who was it?'

'The names on the plate were Steele and Carruthers.'

'So she went to a strange doctor! That explains a lot. But I'm going to check up just the same.'

'They may not tell you,' I cautioned.

'Rubbish,' Verna said. 'I'm her mother. If my daughter is going to have a baby, I suppose I've a right to know that?'

She swept out to the telephone and soon we could hear her voice raised commandingly. Alex poured himself a drink and sank wearily on the arm of a chair beside me.

'It's insane,' he said. 'Simply demented.'

'You don't know anything that might throw some light on it?'

He shook his head helplessly. 'I don't know about Earle, but I feel as though I'd been hit over the head with a hammer. This is so unlike Anne. She's wilful, of course, she's always had a mind of her own. But she has always confided in me before. I feel suddenly that I don't know my own sister.'

'This idea of another man.'

'Forget it. I was angry when I said that. Anne has been a one-man girl ever since she met Earle.'

'Wasn't there a quarrel?'

'It wasn't serious. It lasted a month then they made it up. They were both as sick as dogs.' He gave me a wry look. 'You were right of course. They love each other.'

'No question of another man.'

'None. Earle had an arrangement with the CBC. He was going back to a post in Toronto. Anne felt she had to stay over here with Verna.'

'When did this happen?'

'A couple of months back. When Anne was still working as an assistant producer. When they made it up she resigned and came home. They were only waiting for Earle's vacation to get hitched.'

'Do you know why she resigned?'

He shrugged. 'Just clearing the decks, I imagine. Anne has never been keen about living in London – she was bred a country girl, you know.'

We were interrupted: Verna stormed in.

'My God, I never would have believed it! That wretched girl actually left instructions that nobody was to be told why she consulted them. I argued. It was Dr Steele. I told him it was absurd that I couldn't be told. I said she'd run away and that we were worried stiff and that if he didn't tell me I would hold him responsible. Do

you know what he said?' Verna trembled with indignation so that her silver pendant earrings jingled. 'He said that he could understand why she wanted to keep her own counsel and that if she was missing we'd better try the police. And then he hung up. Oh, I could have murdered him! My God, let me have a drink.'

She poured herself a stiff Scotch and swallowed a hefty mouthful. Her eyes sparkled; she gave a groan of disgust and plumped down on the settee.

'Well, it can't be anything serious,' Alex said soothingly. 'He would surely have given you a hint if it was.'

'He wouldn't have cared if she were dying tomorrow. That man is a disgrace to medical practice.'

'If she isn't ill then it must be the other thing.'

'I knew it all along.'

'But why should it make her run off like this?'

'I told you, it's shock. It does queer things to women.'

Earle stirred and raised his head. 'You have to be wrong,' he said huskily. 'Anything like that she would have told me. And if she was sick she would have told me too.'

'Nonsense,' Verna said. 'The girl is pregnant. That's the only explanation.'

'It does make a certain sense,' Alex said. 'Though I admit that Earle is in the best position to know.'

Earle scowled at them. His mouth was twisted and his chubby face was looking curiously older. One could see traced in it the face that would be there twenty, thirty years from now. He looked at me.

'George, I've got to find her,' he said hoarsely. 'I don't know where or how. But I've got to find her. *I've got to.*'

'We can't help you,' I said. 'She has a perfect right to disappear.'

'I'm going to find Anne if it takes from now till the end of time.'

'But if she doesn't want you to find her?'

He clenched his fists. 'That can't be so. Anything else I can believe, but not that. It's too crazy.'

'Suppose she's in trouble that you can't help her with.'

'There couldn't be that sort of trouble. Whatever it is I don't care, nothing would ever make any difference. I love her. I've got to find her. Though I have to take the world apart.'

I sighed to myself. These were brave words, but the world isn't taken apart so easily. Every day people disappear and are added to lists that rarely become shorter. If Anne really wanted to break away from Earle I had little doubt that she could succeed. She would have contacts in Rhodesia for one thing. But she could lose herself equally well in the next large town.

'Alex tells me she left you a letter.'

Earle's eyes were stubborn. 'That doesn't help.'

'I think I had better see it if you want a professional opinion.'

He hesitated before feeling in his breast-pocket and producing a crumpled envelope. He handed it to me reluctantly. It had been torn open roughly and bore only his name scribbled large on the front. I took out the letter.

My darling [I read], this is the most dreadful letter that I shall ever have to write. Something has happened, darling, that means that now I can never marry

you. Please try to understand. If you can't read the writing it's because I'm crying so much. I love you, darling. I have to do this. It's my own fault and I must take the consequences. Don't believe I love you the less. There never will be any other man. It's just damnable. I can't tell you what it is. I daren't wait to let you ask me. I'm going now, darling. Mother knows nothing. There's nobody I can tell. I'm not asking you to forget me but you must be sensible, darling, and try not to be unhappy. Don't try to find me, it's no use. Oh darling, God bless you. Anne.

The missive was tear-stained and the handwriting an uneven scrawl.

I looked it over twice to give my professional faculty of a photographic memory time to function, then I refolded the sheet and placed it in the envelope and handed it back to Earle. Verna was watching me like a lynx: I felt safe in assuming that she had not had sight of that letter.

'She says she can't marry you. Not that she won't.'

Earle nodded miserably as he returned it to his pocket.

'If there is a reason, shouldn't one of you be able to guess at it?'

I gave them a hard stare: they merely stared back.

'Then suppose we consider some reasons,' I said. 'I agree with Alex that Dr Steele would have mentioned a serious illness. But he might not have felt bound to mention some abnormality, say something that might prevent Anne from having children.'

'Oh, nonsense,' Verna said promptly. 'Anne is as normal as you or I.'

'She would have told me,' Earle said. 'She just would have. Like I would have told her if I was crook.'

'And pregnancy is out?'

'That's certain.'

'She has no other connection with Dr Steele that we know about.'

'I'll swear she hasn't,' Verna said. 'I know who she's been seeing since she came home.'

It wasn't a conclusive circumstance, but I passed it. 'What I'm getting at is this. If there are no medical reasons, we seem left with the alternatives of influence and coercion. Anne says it is her own fault. That suggests that she has placed herself in some sort of quandary. She is under threat or pressure from some quarter. At least you should be able to make suggestions.'

Alex's eyes narrowed. 'What exactly do you mean by threats and pressures?'

I shrugged. 'They would have to be strong to make Anne act the way she has.'

'A political thing? You're thinking of father?'

'I am asking for suggestions.'

'Well, I don't think that's one. We're none of us political. No connection with reds or terrorists.'

'I believe your father had pro-African sympathies.'

'Father was a policeman doing his job. He might have had sympathies but he was never disloyal. You may take it that we have no subversive leanings.'

'Oh, how stupid!' Verna moaned. 'George, you have no idea about Rhodesia. And Alex and Anne were in school in England, anyway. You just don't know how silly you're being.'

I saw Alex give his mother a quick look.

'Very well then,' I said. 'We'll forget politics. That brings us to the BBC and

Anne's residence in London. You two saw plenty of her there and you would know the people she knew. You would know her routines and her free-time activities and her flatmates, if she had any. Take your time and think about that. Anything unusual or surprising may have a bearing.'

Alex stared at the empty glass he was holding and Earle frowned at Verna's Indian carpet. Both were items of some small value but neither seemed to contain enlightenment.

'She was staying with another girl,' Alex said at last. 'Peggy Taylor. Peggy's a script editor. She has a flat in Shepherds Bush. But I can think of nothing unusual about that.'

'Peggy is a nice girl,' Verna said. 'We've had her down here once or twice. Her father is a director of a firm in Reading. There is nothing sinister about Peggy.'

'Was she particularly friendly with Anne?'

Alex gestured with the glass. 'Rather more with me. I don't think Anne would run to Peggy if she were in trouble. Peggy would have rung us by now if she had.'

I glanced towards Earle. 'What about Anne's men-friends?'

'Yes, well, she was popular,' Alex said smoothly. 'But strictly Queensberry. Then Earle came along, and none of the others stood a chance after that.'

'Could you single one out?'

He shook his head firmly.

'The other evening a name was mentioned.'

Alex looked blank. Then he remembered. 'Nigel Fortuny. Just forget him.'

'Nigel is Alex's bête noire,' Verna said hastily. 'He thinks he played him a dirty trick. I don't think we should discuss Nigel. Anne would never have got mixed up with him.'

I was silent for a moment. In this Nigel Fortuny I sensed an area of interesting morbidity. And it was Anne who had brought up his name on that earlier occasion in this room. I tried to recall the way it had happened. She had been seeking to puncture her mother's effusiveness. But she must have known that a reference to Fortuny would offend Alex and introduce a disagreeable note to the conversation. I felt this was out of character; there had been a certain bitterness in her tone; it was as though Fortuny had been uppermost in her mind and she had been unable to pass an opportunity to mention his name. But of course this might have had no connection with her disappearance and nobody seemed inclined to attribute it to Fortuny. Earle sighed suddenly.

'It's no use. There just isn't any reason but me. I guess she loved me but I wasn't good enough. When it came to the crunch she couldn't go through with it.'

'Oh Earle,' Verna cried. 'How can you say that?'

Earle shook his head. 'It has to be true. I railroaded her into it. She wasn't ready. So she panicked. And that's all.'

'The little fool. She didn't know when she was lucky.'

'She had a right to do it,' Earle said. 'What sort of a heel would I have been if I'd held her to marrying me when she didn't want to?' His voice faltered. 'But I want another chance. I want a chance to prove to her that she's wrong. I *must* find her. If you know where she is, in pity's name tell me.'

'Oh, if I could, if I could!' wailed Verna tearfully. 'Do you think we're hiding her from you, Earle? I've racked my brains to think where she could have gone. Ask Alex if you don't believe me.'

‘One usually starts by checking relatives,’ I put in.

‘But what relatives could Anne possibly go to? She wouldn’t dare to try Colin’s people and mother would never—’ she broke off, her eyes rounding comically. ‘Oh my God – mother must be at the station, and there’s nobody there to meet her!’

Alex got to his feet. ‘I’ll go.’

‘Yes, but Alex, what shall I say to her? Oh, that girl! I could honestly beat her. She doesn’t know what humiliation she’s caused.’

Verna groaned and poured more Scotch and drank it in quick, indignant gulps. Alex went. Earle sat hugging his knees, his mouth small and his eyes empty.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN VERNA'S MOTHER arrived, I left. My usefulness, if any, was at an end. Verna may have had initial apprehensions but in fact her mother was the person she most needed at that time. Mrs Granger was a fortress. She was a no-nonsense matron with a sturdy figure and blue-rinsed hair. She spoke in determined tones and with a Devon accent that seemed to give unusual authority to what she said. She quickly took charge of the situation, both emotionally and practically, and her presence was so bracing that from this point onwards I felt that Verna could relax and enjoy her calamity. I would like to have spoken to Earle alone but it was doubtful whether I would have got the chance. In the court that formed around Mrs Granger there was little opportunity to get him aside. I did hint that he might drive me home but Earle was too absorbed in his misfortune to respond; so I took my picture and quietly withdrew: I believe only Alex noticed my going.

And this time I did make notes when I returned to my comfortless room. Though I couldn't put a finger on it, I had an uneasy sensation that the mystery had a side that was less than innocent. I wished I had been able to interrogate freely. I didn't think that they had told me the whole truth. I felt that I could have sorted the matter out with just a little more co-operation. I wanted to know more about Fortuny; I wanted to know more about the quarrel; I wanted to know more precisely why, after the reconciliation, Anne had given up her job and returned home. There was meat in this. I chafed at my present incapacity to dig it out; but the affair was not a police matter and I had to be content with what I'd got. So I noted down the details, including the text of Anne's pitiful letter. I have these notes beside me now on the desk in my study at Elphinstone Road. While on the wall, between my stuffed pike and a bookcase overloaded with forensic literature, hangs that view of a landscape in Provence on a scorching day in 1820.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE COURSE ENDED and I returned to town. I was quickly involved in a case of some consequence. It concerned the death of a wealthy socialite and a man distantly connected with my sister's husband. The case was not merely of consequence to the news media (though a dramatic development brought them running) but it included a suspect who, in the upshot, was to change my life quite radically. In short, I fell in love. I met the woman who presumably had been waiting for me. I must confess that I fell with all possible reluctance because, as I said, she was one of my suspects. But she was cleared; she had made up her mind; it then remained for me to make up mine; and my private life for a time was preoccupied in coming to terms with this engaging problem. Thus the affair of Colin's family and Earle Sambrooke tended to be pushed out of my mind, and I was thinking of anything but that when, three months later, I came across a short paragraph in the *Evening Standard*.

> At Bow Street Magistrates' Court today Earle Jeffrey Sambrooke (29), a newsreader, was fined £50 for assaulting the radio and television actor, Nigel Fortuny. The offence took place in Fortuny's flat at 23, Surrey Gardens, St John's Wood. Sambrooke pleaded guilty.

I still had Earle's number. I rang him. 'What's this trouble you've been in with Fortuny?'

'You read the paper?'

'Yes.'

'I busted that creep on the jaw.'

'But what's it about?'

'I'd sooner not discuss it.'

'It has to do with Anne, hasn't it?'

He hesitated and I knew I was right: I'd had money on Fortuny from the start.

'Look, I'd appreciate a chat,' I said. 'Join me at home for a bite to eat.'

'I'm not sure that I want to chat to coppers at the moment. And I sure as hell don't have an appetite.'

'You're feeling sore. I'm not surprised.'

'I feel I could punch a hole in a wall.'

'I've got a wall that needs a hole in it.'

He was silent. Then: 'All right.'

I called in Mrs Jarvis and requested her savoury omelettes for supper. About half an hour later Earle slammed his Pontiac against the kerb outside. The Pontiac was no longer spruce and its owner was sporting a modest black eye. His step had lost a little of the bounce that once had been so characteristic. He held out his hand.

'Hiya, fella.'

I led him to the study where drinks were waiting. Earle took his glass and prowled for a moment, eyeing the books, the furniture, the pictures. Then he turned and gave me a look. There was desperation in his voice.

'Where is she, George?'

I shook my head. 'I don't know where she is, Earle.'

'That's what they both say, Alex and Verna. But someone has to know.'

'You think that they do?'

'I'm darned sure of it. She certainly would have got in touch with one of them. She wouldn't let Verna worry. But me, I don't rate a picture postcard.' His eye was keen. 'Have you been seeing them?'

'Not since my stay at Blockford.'

He paused before nodding. 'I guess not. I just feel it's all happening behind my back.'

He pulled up an old Spanish chair which I use mostly to stack magazines on and sank on its comfortless leather seat with a motion that was tired and heavy. Those three months had certainly changed him. The gaiety that had been his charm was gone. Instead he had a brooding, resentful expression that made his face look lumpier, plainer. He had never been handsome; now the boyishness had left him; he seemed to have lost his youth at a stroke. And there was a pallor in the slightly fleshy cheeks, an unhealthy tone: I suspected drink.

'You are bound to feel down a bit at the moment. Being done in court is never much fun.'

'It's no fun at all. It's like being stripped. I just want to quit this stuffed-shirt country.'

'Who was the beak?'

'Name of Hoskins.'

'I know him. You could have done worse.'

Earle said nothing. He was sitting elbows on knees, rolling his untouched glass between his hands.

'Was it worth fifty quid?'

'Huh.'

'I take it you got the better of the scrap.'

'I knocked him cold. It was worth the dough. But I should have beaten him to a bloody pulp.'

'Then you'd have been inside.'

'So what. I'm not doing so good out here. I've been figuring it out. For under ten years I could have fixed that louse for keeps.'

'You've been drinking,' I said. 'Or you wouldn't talk like that to a copper. You had better tell me what's going on. It could save you another dip in your pocket.'

Earle rolled the glass a little more. 'That snake has been seeing Anne. I think he knows where she is. I had a go at beating it out of him.'

'When did he come into it?'

'When we had the row.'

'You mean it was really about him?'

Earle shook his head. 'It was the way you were told. But when I moved out, he moved in.'

Then he told me about Fortuny. Fortuny was a man with a reputation. He was a minor actor but he was also a freelance scriptwriter and a producer. He was

handsome; from Earle's description I could envisage a tall, athletic man, with crisp black hair, blue, smiling eyes and the features of a male fashion model. He was not greatly successful at his occupations but he had a charm that helped him along, and he was the particular friend of a Programme Controller whom Earle described as eating out of his hand. He was thirty-five and unmarried: his reputation was with the ladies. Though they were not forward to marry him he seemed to be the type of lover that every woman needed, once, before she died. He had been in trouble about women. Earle was not the first to endanger Fortuny's classic profile, but it appeared that Fortuny could handle himself and it was usually the other man who came off worst. One or two cases had come to court and there had been other disgruntled fine-payers; while, eighteen months earlier, an incident had occurred that had led to a criminal action. Earle's expression was angry as he spoke of it.

'Fortuny had a part in a TV play. It was called *The Lost Harvest*, it was about herring fishing, and they were shooting on location at Lowestoft. They'd hired a trawler. The trawler crew were in the film along with the cast. After the day's shooting the crew were invited along to the hotel where the unit was staying. One of the deckhands brought his girlfriend – he was swanking a bit, you can bet – and Fortuny made a play for her, and the youngster pulled a knife. They got them apart. Nobody was hurt. It probably wouldn't have happened except for the booze. But Fortuny called in the cops and the kid got six months in Norwich jail.' Earle's eyes were glinting. 'What do you think of that?'

I shrugged. 'I've met his type before. I think they are probably mildly psychotic. The sad part starts when they begin to grow old.'

'Psychotic my foot. A louse is a louse.'

'What was the trick he played on Alex?'

'Oh that. He swiped a programme. Anything goes with Fortuny.'

But it was serious enough, I learned: at least it was in Alex's eyes. It had happened during the previous summer when Alex and Fortuny were still friendly. Fortuny came down to spend a weekend. Alex was working on an idea. It was a dramatized history of the great Victorian industrialists, to run in a serial of twenty parts. Alex was enthusiastic. He discussed it with Fortuny, who had experience in planning serials. He showed Fortuny a synopsis of the whole and detailed treatment of two of the instalments. Then Alex submitted it to the Programme Controller, the same who was friendly with Fortuny. It was turned down. A month later, an identical series was accepted from Fortuny. Alex complained; it did him no good; the Controller would listen to no criticism of Fortuny. What was worse, Alex found himself passed over when other projects were being allocated. Needless to say there had been scenes with Fortuny, though they had not finished up in brawls, and it was easy to see why Alex reacted so strongly when Fortuny's name was mentioned. Fortuny had not merely played him a dirty trick; he was jeopardizing Alex's career.

I listened to all this with growing scepticism. 'But Anne would never have taken up with Fortuny.'

'Look, fella, when we had that bust-up Anne was pretty bitter with me.'

'But what proof have you?'

'Lots of proof. How do you think I've been spending my time? I've been asking questions, just like you would, and grilling everyone who knew her. She was seen with him, seen in his car, seen coming out of his flat. That Lothario caught her on the rebound. Somehow he managed to turn her head.'

‘If he did it was only temporarily.’

‘She jilted me, didn’t she?’

‘And you suspect she is with him now?’

‘That’s why I busted into his flat. But she wasn’t around when I was there.’

I shook my head. ‘You acted like an idiot. You can’t just go busting into people’s flats.’

‘You can if you’re prepared to take the consequences.’

‘I begin to think that Hoskins let you down lightly.’

We went in to our meal, where I had the satisfaction of seeing him tackle his omelette with appetite. No doubt our talk was doing him good and I surmised that he had nobody else in whom he could confide. But I couldn’t accept his notion about Anne being with Fortuny. She had too much character to become attached to such a man. I could imagine her solacing her outraged feelings with him but she would have dropped him without a pang when she and Earle were reconciled. Fortuny might be the reason why she resigned; she would be wanting to withdraw from contact with him. But of himself he could not be the reason for her disappearance, and his flat would be the last place where I would have looked for her. Alas there was another, more heart-rending, possibility. I wondered that it hadn’t occurred to Earle. Apparently it hadn’t, and I felt that this was no time to increase his anguish by suggesting it. At least, as he ate steadily through the omelette, he was beginning to see some sense about Fortuny.

‘You know, I may be a mug to think she ran off with him. She wouldn’t let that louse take her in so easily. Fortuny has a reputation that stinks. She couldn’t ever have kidded herself he would marry her.’

‘I’m certain she didn’t go to him.’

‘So it comes back to me. There was something about me that she wasn’t sure of. Perhaps that gigolo soured her on men. I should have taken it out of his hide.’

‘I think you’d better get him out of your mind.’

Earle ate in silence for a few moments. ‘I guess I’ve come to a dead end,’ he said at last. ‘Busting Fortuny was just making the motions.’

‘She loved you, Earle. I’ll swear to that.’

He gave me a twisted look. ‘Past tense is right. And there’s not a thing I can do about it. She’s gone, and I’m not to know where.’

‘I believe she’ll get in touch with you when she’s ready.’

‘But how long is that going to be, fella? Doesn’t she know I’m eating away inside like there’s a hole there that can’t be filled?’

‘Just trust her.’

‘It’s like everything had stopped. It stopped that evening back in Blockford. I don’t want to do anything, don’t want to be anything. It’s all standing still: until I find her.’

I was silenced. I thought that perhaps I could put him in the way of finding her, but if what I suspected was true I felt it was best that Anne should play it her own way. She had acted hastily but she had had time to consider and I thought she could be relied upon to judge wisely. It was hard on Earle, but it might be harder on Anne if I sought to interfere. I refilled his glass; he drank automatically.

‘Why not take a trip?’ I suggested.

‘You mean get away from it all, that jazz?’

‘The remedy has been known to work.’

He drank, then shook his head. ‘It wouldn’t work in my case. Suppose she rang me when I was away. I wouldn’t be able to live long enough to get back.’

‘She’ll find a way to reach you when she wants to, and meanwhile you’re doing no good here. You were going to visit your father in the fall. He’s probably looking forward to it. I should go.’

Earle hesitated. ‘That’s good advice. I wish I had the guts to take it.’

‘Then go.’

He gave a heavy sigh. ‘But that was to have been a double ticket.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE MADE THE trip: I talked him into it. It seemed the kindest thing that I could do. If my theory was correct I felt convinced that Anne would not try to contact him just then. Also I was by no means persuaded that Earle's vendetta with Fortuny had ended in the Bow Street Magistrates' Court; a cooling-down period in Hamilton, Ontario had a great deal to recommend it.

After he had gone that evening I rang Verna.

'Verna, I've just been talking to Earle.'

'What about Earle?'

I took it that Verna didn't see the London evening papers.

'He's been in trouble with Nigel Fortuny. He burst into Fortuny's flat and assaulted him. The case was in court this morning and Earle was fined fifty pounds.'

A few moments passed while Verna digested this. 'George, I haven't much time for Earle these days. He's behaving like a child. He was very rude to me. He seems to hold us responsible for Anne's jilting him.'

'He had an idea that she was with Fortuny.'

'That's ridiculous and he knows it. I don't know why everyone is so against Nigel. I thought he was charming when he was down here.'

'You think perhaps he's being misrepresented.'

'I can only speak as I find. I know that Alex has taken against him, but that's no reason why I should too. And as for Earle's conduct, it's disgraceful. I don't think a fifty-pound fine is adequate. I'm beginning to see now why Anne ran out on him. His behaviour isn't civilized.'

'He wanted to know where Anne was.'

'My God, you didn't tell him, did you?'

So Verna knew.

'I decided it best to leave matters where they stood.'

Verna was silent. She was wondering too late if I really did know, and if so, how. But if she was conscious of having given herself away she persuaded herself that probably I hadn't noticed.

'When she gets in touch I shall take great care that Earle is the last person to be told. That boy isn't stable. I should have thought he'd proved that by what he did to poor Nigel.'

'He would certainly have reason to be angry.'

'He would go through the roof.'

'Fortunately, he doesn't seem to suspect the truth.'

Verna lapsed into another fertile silence.

'Of course, he may work out where she went,' I prodded. 'It only calls for a little common sense. I don't suppose she had much money. She needed somewhere to stay for – how long? A year?'

Verna gasped. ‘You don’t think he’ll guess?’

‘Earle isn’t exactly a born detective. But it wouldn’t surprise me if one of these days he began to think in terms of Scotland.’

‘He doesn’t know the address!’

‘That may put him off. Though a determined investigator could find it.’

‘But it’s utterly remote – the back of beyond.’

‘If it is on the phone it is on record.’

I heard sounds at the other end suggestive of Verna’s taking a fresh middle. I could picture her sitting on the phone seat in the study at Blockford, her eyes determined and her mouth tight.

‘Now look here, George. This could be serious. I think you’d better have another talk with Earle. You’ve got to convince him that it’s all over and that Anne is never, never going to marry him. It’s unfortunate, but it’s irrevocable. It’s just no use his waiting around. After all, he’s young, he can soon get over it, and there are plenty more fish in the sea.’

‘Suppose he doesn’t listen to me.’

‘He’s got to listen to you. Otherwise he’ll be causing a great deal of unhappiness. If he really does love Anne he’ll remember that and do the right thing. But you must convince him that now she’ll never marry him and that it would be best for him to go back to Canada. That would be ideal for both of them, and it’s what he always wanted to do.

‘It would tidy things up.’

‘There’s no need to be cynical. You must see that it’s the only answer. While he hangs around here he’s going to make trouble and perhaps have another go at poor Nigel.’

There she had a point.

‘Well, I have talked to him,’ I conceded. ‘And I think I’ve persuaded him to go home for a break. I dare say he will come back seeing things clearer. He’s feeling very down in the mouth just now.’

‘Of course I’m sorry for Earle and all that.’

‘The bottom did rather drop out of his world.’

‘All the same, he has taken it badly, and it will be a relief when he goes home for good.’

I hung up and dropped into an easy chair and lit my pipe and cogitated. I felt that my theory was proved but it didn’t make me happy. I thought of Anne and of that traumatic moment when she had stepped out of the doctor’s surgery. I could hear the words that she had just heard and that now were pounding in her brain. She had done it. Her life was in ruins. There wasn’t any way out. Abortion? Passing it off? They weren’t the ways of Anne Mackenzie. And nobody she could tell. Not Verna or Alex. Not me. She had had to face it alone. There was nothing left for her except to run. But where could she go? With very little money and so much need for support and protection? If only Colin had been alive, the one person who would always have taken her part! Alas, she could no longer go to him, but there remained the people who had loved him, who were most like him, most like her: who might receive her just because she was Colin’s. So she had written that bitter letter though the tears were almost blinding her, had somehow kept up her front with Verna, and in the morning slipped away. Beside her grief Earle’s seemed half-selfish: all the consolation was his: all the alternatives were open to him. Anne just had a broken

heart.

I remained some while sitting and smoking and gazing at the watercolour that had never been given. Then I went to my desk and switched on the light. I opened a pad and made notes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NEXT DAY was Wednesday. In the evening I did something that I confess to doing very rarely: I switched on the television and sat down to watch the Wednesday Play.

There is an anaemia about television drama that I am told is intrinsic. I once discussed the point with a playwright who happens also to be a dramatic critic. He averred that the weakness lay in the medium, which he described as essentially a branch of journalism; when you wrote a script for TV you were pouring your talent into a bottomless well. A successful theatre play lives. It is a creative act of substance. It is printed and remembered and revived and reassessed. But play scripts written for television vanish into nothingness the moment they are performed, and those who write them are inhibited by awareness of this expendability. The only TV drama worth watching, my friend concluded, was that written originally for other media, or at least based on literary work that could provide an independent inspiration.

My Wednesday Play fell into neither category. It was called *The Glass Interval*. It was about a West Indian youth with a bored expression and a girl who spoke with a Brummie accent. They met on a see-saw in a children's playground. They seemed to have very little to say to each other. They gazed at each other unsmilingly and when they did speak seemed to be sharing one set of lines between them. I suppose this conveyed their sense of togetherness. They left the see-saw when a policeman approached. They wandered with a slow, balletic gait through mean streets and a demolition site, and sat earnestly regarding each other over cups of tea in a workmen's cafe. Then they strolled into a studio where an artist was painting. The artist was strangely and immediately struck by them. He was effusive. He could perceive between them, as I could not, a Glass Interval. He offered them fruit and wine and begged to be allowed to paint them, then and there. They gazed at each other. They were plainly offended. They strolled out of the studio. I switched off.

And so (as no doubt you will have guessed) I made the distant acquaintance of Nigel Fortuny, unloved by Alex, detested by Earle, but not entirely written off by Verna. He played the artist. The part was a poor one, and Fortuny could offer little to improve it. As an actor he rested on his good looks and a trim, athletic presence. He was an awkward mover, at least on set, and given to the frenetic use of gesture; he delivered his lines with a monotonous attack that had almost an air of bullying. But he was handsome. He had a Roman nose, which was something that Earle hadn't mentioned, and a strong, obstinate jawline and straight, manly brows. For looks I'm afraid he left Earle in the shade. It was easy to see why women fell for him. It was not difficult to understand why Anne had turned to him after a hectic quarrel with Earle. Fortuny was a sweetie; by gathering him in she was soothing her injured *amour propre*. For that she hadn't needed a paragon of virtue but a handsome brute

for whom other women would envy her. She may not have intended an affair, but I imagined that Fortuny would be difficult to resist. He was thirty-five. He was a practised seducer and probably an exciting performer in bed. So Anne had fallen; and that casual union had evoked a havoc out of all proportion. Whatever happy ending Verna might be dreaming of I knew was vain after seeing the man. Fortuny was nobody's husband, Fortuny could rate no respect from Anne. If Anne was as sensible as I supposed her, she would take care that she never saw Fortuny again. Fortuny was an episode in women's lives: he would never be a principal actor.

I asked Mrs Jarvis her opinion of him.

'Oh, he's lovely,' she replied. 'My Linda got his autograph up at the TV Centre. He made her go all over queer.'

'Would you like him for a son-in-law?'

'Go on with you. Why should he look at the likes of us?'

'He might fancy Linda.'

'Linda's a good girl. She knows better than to lark with his sort.'

Which I took to prove my point. Mrs Jarvis can usually see the end of her nose.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EARLE NEGLECTED TO get in touch with me when he returned from his trip to Canada and on two later occasions when I rang Verna my ring was not answered. She was, I learned afterwards, visiting her mother, but I was discouraged from trying again, and contented myself with the reflection that I knew most of what there was to be known. The mystery was over, and my interest in the affair subsided. I was not, after all, very closely acquainted with the people who were involved. I doubted whether Verna regarded me highly, Alex viewed me with indifference, Anne had cut herself off and Earle had lost his taste for policemen. Anne I regretted. I had been too fond of Colin not to be moved by her misfortunes; but even Anne I had met only twice, however deep an impression she had made on me. And meanwhile, as I mentioned earlier, I was finding my own affairs absorbing. In all, I felt I could contain my impatience until the course of events brought me news.

But the course of events was tardy. Christmas passed and I had heard nothing. At Easter I spent a few memorable days in Paris in the company I most desired. Then, at the beginning of June, some time fell due to me as compensation for extra duties, and since Brenda was unable to get away I planned to spend it on a visit to my sister and her husband in Somerset. I returned home early on the Wednesday to pack, and arranged with Mrs Jarvis to have breakfast next morning at seven. I rang Brenda and was about to retire when I was called back to the phone.

'George? Verna. I must speak to you.'

My first reaction was relief. When you are a policeman a late phone call is usually a prelude to lost sleep.

'Verna. How are you?'

'Skip the compliments. Something really ghastly has happened. You'll probably read it in the papers tomorrow and you're the only person I know who can help.'

I hesitated. 'Is it Earle again?'

'My God. Yes it is.'

'Another upset with Fortuny?'

'It's more than that. Earle's killed him.'

I had been standing by the desk, impatient to hang up and get to bed. Now I sat down rather suddenly and took a firmer grip on the phone.

'Would you mind repeating that?'

'I said Earle's killed him. He went for him again and did him in.'

'When?'

'This afternoon.'

'But there's been no word of this at the Yard.'

Verna made exasperated noises. 'It didn't happen in London, stupid. It was at Kyleness. Alex has just rung me. Earle is in custody at Dornoch.'

'In Scotland, you mean?'

‘Yes, in Scotland! Of course, Anne was staying with Colin’s family. She had the baby there, that’s what it is about. Why else do you think Earle went for him?’

‘But what was Fortuny doing at Kyleness?’

‘Never mind that! It’s a long story. Listen, George, we’ve got to help them. That damned little fool is still in love with Earle.’

‘Exactly how can we help them?’

‘You’ve got to go up there. You’ve got to take over the case. Earle didn’t mean to kill him, it’s manslaughter. I should think you could get him off altogether.’

‘Do you know the cause of death?’

‘He threw him over a cliff. I believe there’s some nonsense about a knife.’

‘A knife!’

‘That’s why you’ve got to go there. The knife is a plant. You’ve got to prove it.’

I leaned back in my chair and sighed. ‘Verna, you’d better face the facts. If what you tell me is true there is no question of manslaughter, and if Fortuny was stabbed the knife can’t be a plant.’

‘But you don’t know that until you get up there.’

‘Nor is there any question of my going up there. I am an officer in the Metropolitan Police Force and my writ doesn’t run outside the area.’

‘That’s rubbish.’

‘I’m afraid it’s true.’

‘You’re at the Yard and you go anywhere.’

‘Only on assignment in England and Wales. Across Carter Bar I would just be a nuisance.’

‘Oh *God*.’ She made other noises. ‘George, you know you’re just putting me off. I don’t know the protocol and I don’t care. They’ll listen to you all right if you go up there.’

‘They wouldn’t and I wouldn’t blame them. What Earle seems to need is a lawyer.’

‘With you breathing down their necks they’d have to go easy on him.’

‘They would probably arrest me too. For obstruction.’

She paused to take second wind but then she came back strongly. ‘George, whatever you say you can’t just wash your hands of this. You were Colin’s great friend. And you are Earle’s friend too. And then there’s Anne. You know she loves him. How do you think she is feeling now? With this trumped-up charge against him, and him eating his heart out in a cell in Dornoch?’

‘The way you tell it it isn’t a trumped-up charge.’

‘You know very well what I mean. And you, the one person who could help them, sitting on the sidelines and talking protocol. It isn’t good enough. It isn’t like the man whom Colin told me so much about. He said I could always go to you in a jam and that’s what I’m doing, George. It’s up to you.’

Though the subject was so grave I couldn’t resist a little smile. There was something so engaging in the naivety of Verna’s tactics. But of course she was right. I couldn’t turn my back if the affair was half as serious as she represented it. I could be of no use in an official capacity but I was a friend who knew the ropes; and Verna had struck the right chord when she harped on Colin and drew a picture of Anne’s distress. Also I was free to act. Geoffrey and Bridget I would be seeing in a few weeks anyway, and the relatives of policemen learn never to be surprised at a last-minute change of plan. I could go: but what I really needed to know was how far I

could believe in Verna's story. It was shocking, but was it entirely true? I felt I must have independent confirmation.

'Look, I'll run over to Blockford in the morning. Then you can put me in the picture.'

'That's a waste of time. We've got to get up there. I can tell you on the way.'

'You intend to come with me?'

'Naturally. It's a hundred miles from Inverness. I don't drive and there are no proper buses. You're the only way I can get there.'

'Verna, you do have your facts straight?'

'George, just try to get here early.'

I made a face at the stuffed pike. 'Very well, then.'

'We can be in Inverness by evening.'

I depressed the studs and dialled a number that seemed to have worn a groove in the gears. I asked for an extension and after a wait I was put through.

'Gerald?'

'George. I thought you were making tracks for the West Country.'

'Gerald, I need some information.'

'Who rings this number for anything else?'

'After I left today was any check requested on a Canadian national called Sambrooke? I'm told he's held at Dornoch. That would be Sutherland County Police.'

'Sambrooke. Isn't he a chum of yours?'

'He was going to marry Colin Mackenzie's daughter.'

'Aha. What's he been up to?'

'That's what I'm hoping to find out.'

There followed another wait while Gerald Pagram pursued inquiries with CRO. He came back.

'Sambrooke's in trouble. He's detained in a murder investigation. The victim was a TV actor, Nigel Fortuny. Sambrooke's being held on an assault charge.'

'An assault charge?'

'Need I say more?'

I shook my head. Not to a policeman. It meant only that they hadn't dotted the last i; perhaps the knife hadn't turned up yet.

'What did CRO give them?'

'Nothing known. He's pure.'

'He was nicked at Bow Street for common assault.'

'What would CRO know about that?'

It wasn't an indictable offence, but Sutherland would certainly get to know of it. In fact, they would get to know of it from me. I should have to tell them if I went up there. Pagram chuckled.

'Would I be right in thinking that your West Country trip is off?'

'I'm in a difficult position. I know the background of the case.'

'You could stay clear.'

'I doubt it.'

'I think I'd better forget you rang me.'

'I think you better had.'

He chuckled again. 'Good luck with the natives.'

I hung up and got my notes from the file drawer in the desk. I read them through

twice and sat a little longer to scribble a fresh entry. I didn't know it then, but I could perhaps have solved that case without ever moving from the phone. The critical fact was in the notes. But perhaps it was better the way it went.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I ATE MY breakfast at the hour appointed and was on the road by half-past seven. It was a drizzly sort of day, not what one would have picked for a punishing drive. Over breakfast I had scanned the *Telegraph*. It contained a cagey sort of paragraph. Fortuny wasn't big enough to make a fuss over and Earle was still a man who was helping the police. Sutherland were playing it close, and I drew a sombre satisfaction from the circumstance. It meant that the case wasn't yet cut and dried and that some small hope might remain for Earle.

I arrived at Verna's at half-past eight, by which time the rain was pelting in earnest. Verna was waiting impatiently in the hall with a pair of large and swagger suitcases.

'You're late. We'll never get to Inverness.'

'If you were in such a hurry you could have flown up.'

'What's the use of that when I'd have been stuck there?'

'There are things called hire cars.'

'It's a hundred beastly miles.'

I loaded her cases into the boot of the Sceptre, which was my transport at that time. Verna. who couldn't afford a hire car, was wearing a short-cut classic coat in mink. Beneath it she had on a Hartnell suit in a becoming shade of beige and on her head a matching hat with a romantically swept brim. Her comely features were deftly made up and a diamond-cluster ring sparkled on her finger. She carried a lizard-skin handbag. I felt she was almost too grand to be travelling in the small beer of the Sceptre. She came out carrying a silver-mounted umbrella.

'George, I'm planning to lunch at Penrith.'

'We're not taking that road.'

'But I've booked a table.'

'That's too bad. It will be on your conscience.'

She took her seat with a disconcerted air. I pointed the Sceptre towards the A1. We picked it up near Eaton Socon and settled down to the long haul north. I had a great deal to say to Verna but I felt it would do her no harm to stew a while, so I drove silently through the hissing rain and let the miles tick up against the clock. Verna seemed in no hurry to talk either. She sat staring sulkily ahead past the wipers. We put fifty-five miles in the first hour and not a word passed between us. At last she sighed with deep feeling and took a cigarette from the lizard-skin bag. She lit it with the lighter from the Sceptre's dash and breathed smoke delicately through her nostrils.

'I suppose it really is too much to expect that you would tell me I'm looking nice.'

I spared her a glance from the road, but she continued to stare haughtily in front of her.

'You hurt me last night, George. You made me crawl. I had every right to expect

support from you. After all, if you were *such* a good friend of Colin's you should have jumped at a chance of helping his wife.'

'You think I should have.'

'Yes I do. It would only have been the decent thing. And I wasn't asking for so much either. This is right up your street.'

'You haven't asked why I'm not at the Yard.'

She looked at me sideways and breathed smoke. 'That has very little to do with it. I imagine you can always get time off for matters of this sort.'

'In fact I was about to start a short holiday. I was leaving this morning to visit Somerset. Now instead I am chauffeuring you to the north of Scotland and about to meddle in affairs that are none of my business.'

'How can you say they are none of your business!'

'Because that's what I'll be told by the police at Dornoch. And furthermore there are long odds that my presence there will prejudice Earle rather than help him.'

'I don't believe it.'

'You had better believe it. In the first place I am a policeman. I can't and I won't bend the facts. If the facts are prejudicial then that's too bad.'

She breathed smoke fiercely. 'I don't think you want to help.'

'Quite the reverse. I don't think I can.'

'You've taken against me, George, that's what.'

'Verna, I want to know what's been going on.'

She stuck her chin out at the windscreen and went into her silent sulks again. I drove on placidly. I was determined to be fully briefed before we reached Dornoch. It would perhaps need digging. I suspected that the facts were less than flattering to Verna. But I meant to have them. If I was going to help Earle I had to know exactly how things stood. Verna stubbed her cigarette with venom.

'George, you're being quite beastly to me,' she said. 'I don't know what you meant by your last remark. Anyone would think that *I* was responsible.'

'What was Fortuny doing at Kyleness?'

'Well! And why shouldn't he be there?'

'I'm asking you.'

'Don't pretend you don't know. He was the father of Anne's baby.'

'So what was he doing there?'

'In heaven's name! He went to see Anne and the baby, didn't he? Surely a man wants to see his own child. There's nothing sinister about that.'

I shook my head. 'It won't do. Fortuny had to know where to find them. And if my reading of Fortuny's character is near the truth he wouldn't travel seven hundred miles to visit his bastard.'

'That's a filthy word to use for Anne's baby.'

'I'm sure Fortuny would have used it himself.'

'Nigel was a gentleman.'

'Anything but.'

'My God, why did I have to pick on you?'

She sat back fuming. When Verna was angry she had an attractive sparkle in her eye and her painted mouth took on a curl so pronounced that it was mildly comic. Now she was breathing in short spurts through her pretty but dilated nostrils. No actress could have given a livelier impression of handsomely justified indignation.

'Well, I *told* him where to go.'

I paused to overtake a trailer van. ‘You had been keeping in touch with him?’

‘Yes – why not? Isn’t that what any mother would have done? Anne was having his baby. She’d run out on Earle. Obviously it was in her interest to keep up with Nigel. Being an unmarried mother isn’t a joke and she must have been attracted by him in the first place.’

‘Did you consult her?’

‘Anne is twenty-three. At that age a girl doesn’t know her own mind. She needs an older person to look out for her. Naturally, I dropped a hint now and then.’

‘But in so many words . . . she didn’t know.’

‘I thought I’d let her get on with having the baby. That would be the psychological moment, of course. When the baby comes you want a man around.’

‘So she didn’t know. What about Alex?’

‘You know what Alex was like about Nigel.’

‘And Earle would certainly be kept in the dark.’

Her lips tightened. ‘He was out of the picture.’

I indulged in another bout of overtaking. ‘Of course I understand your position,’ I said. ‘Even in these days of social enlightenment there is a stigma about being an unmarried mother. Fortuny was the man responsible and he could regularize the situation. But one thing still puzzles me. How were you going to bring him up to scratch?’

She flicked me a look. ‘Nigel was decent. He agreed to do the right thing.’

‘He made a voluntary offer of marriage.’

‘That’s what it usually means, isn’t it?’

‘Without the smallest pressure.’

‘Of course. I told you he was a gentleman.’

I clicked my tongue. ‘No.’

Her eyes flashed. ‘What do you mean – no?’

‘I mean that you know and I know that Fortuny wasn’t that much of a gentleman. He was an old-fashioned cad. All other accounts of him agree on that. His first reaction on being taxed with a bastard would be to deny it and ring his lawyer.’

‘That just isn’t true!’

‘I want facts, Verna.’

‘You’re the most insulting man I’ve ever met. You’re a pig. You’ve mixed for so long with criminals that you don’t know how to behave with honest people.’

She turned her head violently to stare through the side window. I kept my face straight and went on vith my driving. We had passed Newark; the rain was easing, and soon I would be able to switch off the wipers.

‘I bribed him, of course,’ Verna snapped at me peevishly. ‘It’s the only way with men like Nigel.’

‘How much?’

‘You go to hell!’ She turned her head again to put out her tongue. ‘These days I’m quite well off, you know. Aunty Vi left me a packet. Well, there was a block of shares in Imperial Tobacco that had taken a knock through the cancer scare. It wasn’t much skin off my nose but it must have looked a lot to Nigel.’

‘Who else knew about this?’

‘Nobody. Unless he blabbed.’

‘Have you taken any steps to transfer the shares?’

‘I’m not a mug. He had to marry her first.’

I slipped by a transporter. ‘What made you think she’d have him?’

‘Well, she never mentioned Earle in her letters. And after all Nigel was the father. He had only to play his cards right.’

‘Did you honestly think he would make a good husband?’

Verna sniffed. ‘It’s a gamble anyway. You never know how they’re going to turn out when the honeymoon’s over and you turn off the glamour. Men are all the same underneath. It’s just that you have to kid some more than others. So you might as well pick a good-looker and you couldn’t fault Nigel on that.’

‘Isn’t it possible that love meant a little more to Anne?’

‘Anne is too like her father for her own good. But she’ll get out of it. With Nigel on the spot I was pretty certain she’d see the light.’

I drove silently for a stretch. ‘Where would you say it leaves matters now?’

‘It’s tragic of course. It only needed this to convince the little goose that she’s still in love with Earle.’

‘Perhaps she always was.’

‘I don’t see it matters. The point is that she is now. She’ll marry him all right, if he’ll accept the child. And that surely is the least he can do after this.’

‘After murdering Fortuny.’

‘No! I’m certain that all that is a piece of nonsense.’

‘But meanwhile he’s sitting in a cell.’

‘Which is exactly what you’re going to get him out of.’

She lit another cigarette. We swirled through a roundabout and accelerated into the Doncaster Motorway. I was beginning to form a clearer picture of what must have happened yesterday at Kyleness. Fortuny had been there pressing his suit, with a fat block of shares to ensure his persistence. I had no doubt that Anne had rejected him or that he had responded by stepping up his efforts. This in itself was a foolhardy course if Anne enjoyed the protection of the Clan Mackenzie, but it became tantamount to suicide when Earle appeared on the scene. They had met; there had been violence, and seemingly a knife had been introduced. Fortuny had finished up at the bottom of a cliff and Earle in a station cell at Dornoch. The situation was desperate. Unless the knife was Fortuny’s the case against Earle was a pure formality, while even if Fortuny had pulled the knife a manslaughter verdict would be a close-run thing.

‘Who told Earle that Fortuny was up there?’

Verna’s mouth was sour. ‘Alex.’

‘Who told him?’

‘He had to know. I couldn’t suddenly spring it on him after they were married.’

‘Didn’t you realize that he would tell Earle?’

Her expression was stubborn. ‘No, I honestly didn’t. We hadn’t been seeing much of Earle, in fact he hasn’t been to Blockford since last year. Anne didn’t want to see him and he took against us because we wouldn’t tell him where she was. He’s been shifted from Alex’s department. I thought Alex had dropped him altogether.’

‘You knew very well how Alex felt about Fortuny.’

‘That was a stupid misunderstanding. Nigel could have done Alex a lot of good. His marrying Anne would have helped Alex too.’

‘Alex couldn’t have been expected to see it that way.’

‘I still didn’t think he would run to Earle.’ She bit her lip. ‘That was unforgivable. At least he could have given me warning.’

‘Alex is much to blame.’

Verna flashed me an unfriendly look. She took fierce puffs at her cigarette and I noticed that it was trembling.

‘When did Fortuny go up there?’

‘On Saturday. He couldn’t get away before.’

‘And it was only after he’d gone that you told Alex.’

She breathed smoke but said nothing.

‘When was that?’

‘The same evening.’

‘Did Alex and Earle drive together?’

She shook her head. ‘After Earle had gone Alex got worried so he went up too.’

‘What day was that?’

‘Tuesday. Alex rang me after Earle had left. He said Earle was raving. He thought he ought to be there to stop him doing anything stupid. He set off straight away. Alex drives a sports car. He thought he could catch Earle on the road.’

‘But he didn’t.’

She sniffed. ‘Otherwise it might have been a different story. When Alex got there it was all over and they were carting off the body.’

‘Let me get this clear.’ I said. ‘They would both have spent Tuesday night on the road.’

‘Of course. It’s too far to drive in one day. Alex put up at Stirling.’

‘What time did he get to Kyleness?’

‘He got there at four. Earle had arrived soon after lunch. Earle saw Anne. Then he went off to the hotel to have it out with Nigel.’

‘But when Alex arrived it was all over.’

‘Earle seems to have met Nigel coming from the hotel.’ She took a shaky puff. ‘It’s rather confused. I didn’t want to hear too much about it.’

‘Any witnesses?’

‘I don’t know! You’ll have to find all that out when we get there. My God. what I need is a cup of coffee, and if you’re a gentleman you’ll stop now and buy me one.’

I am a policeman and I think like a policeman, but Verna was a mother and she could read my thoughts. I wondered if it had occurred to her before that Alex’s part in the tragedy was, to say the least, interesting. Perhaps not. It may have needed my questions to clarify that point in her mind. And to prove to her that I really was a gentleman, when we left the motorway I bought her a coffee.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WE SPENT THAT night at Crieff, which was far enough up the road for me; Dornoch, another one hundred and sixty miles on, we reached shortly before noon the following day. Sadly, the rain was falling in buckets and obscuring some of Scotland's finest scenery. We had come by Sma' Glen and the Ag and the group of great firths about Inverness. They were all rained off. Through the smoking wrack one caught an occasional Blooming of waters, but such prospects as that from the A836 were completely shuttered by swirling mist. It may be that the weather suited our mood and that a sparkling day would have seemed inappropriate; but I think I could have supported a tragic attitude just as well with a better view of the scenery. It was not to be. We entered Dornoch in the middle of a hissing downpour. I idled the Sceptre along the modest street, located the police station, and parked.

'Do you want to see Earle?'

Verna shook her head decidedly. 'I couldn't face him. It's ten to one that he'll blame me for everything that's happened.'

'Seeing you might cheer him up. He would like to know you were rooting for him.'

'George, I need someone to cheer me up. You'll be the best thing for Earle right now.'

I hesitated. 'It may take a time.'

'That's all right, I'll have lunch. And George . . .'

'Yes?'

'You needn't mention I'm here. There'll be time enough to go into all that later.'

I reached for my hat, shrugging, and prepared to dash through the sheeting rain. This was the moment of the trip to which I had not been looking forward. Police protocol is a jealous institution even where it concerns adjacent authorities, and here, in what was virtually a foreign establishment, I could expect a shoulder as cool as Ben Nevis. They might not in so many words tell me to go and jump in the Firth, but I felt that they would not pass over a fair opportunity to imply it. Lucky my skin was thick. I made my dash and pushed through swing doors into reception.

A sergeant was sittting alone at the counter with the occurrence book open before him. He observed my appearance with a gleam in his eye. I knocked the water from my hat and approached him.

'Is it still raining out there, sir?'

I remembered my diplomacy and smiled. At first sight he had seemed an elderly man but this was due to his hair being almost white. He had slow, grey eyes and in them the look of amusement lingered. I soon dispelled it. I flashed my warrant card. He examined it carefully before proceeding.

'Would you be here on official business, sir?'

'No. But I have information for you.'

He considered this: it was, I knew, the only ploy that would get me in.

'Are you reporting an offence – would you be wanting to speak to traffic?'

'Nothing like that. My information concerns a man you are holding here.'

'Sambrooke, sir?'

'Sambrooke.'

Now his eyes were very wary. 'Aye, well it's kind of you, sir. Perhaps you'll just give me a hint of what it's about.'

That was the last thing I intended doing. 'I want to speak to the officer in charge of the case. I have certain knowledge of the prisoner that may be of assistance to him.'

'Aye, but I doubt if he's just available. You had best leave it with me to pass on.'

I smiled. 'It is essential I talk with him.'

'You may have to wait for quite a while, sir.'

Stalemate. But just then a door opened and a long, cautious face peered out. It was followed by a tall, lean body that drew itself stealthily round the door.

'What's the problem, Snowy?'

The sergeant looked stubborn. 'This man is an English police officer, sir.'

'Is he now?' The newcomer came forward. 'Well, that's a breed we don't see very often.' He peered at me with interest. 'And what can we do for him?'

'It seems he wants to talk to you, sir. It's about Sambrooke. It's not official. I was thinking you would be engaged.'

'Is that the truth?' He looked at me keenly: his eyes were the bluest I had ever seen. 'Well now, it is likely he has come a long way to have this crack with me in Dornoch. Where are you from, man?'

I told him.

'Jings!! He's all the way from the top.' He made a little weaving motion. 'You'd best come in. I can give you twenty minutes till lunch.'

He led the way into a small, pleasant office that smelt of pipe smoke and looked out on to the street. I was over the first hurdle. But I might yet be out again on my ear.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WE INTRODUCED OURSELVES. His name was Sinclair and his rank Detective Inspector. He was forty-fivish and his long face had deep, vertical lines at each side of the mouth. It was a humourless face except for the eyes and surmounted by short, reddish hair. He spoke with an accent that I took to be Sutherland but I learned later that he came from Harris. I introduced myself in full, with the Central Office addition and I didn't hesitate to add that my department was homicide. He heard me glumly.

'Aye. But you'll not be here out of pure curiosity.'

I decided to waste no time in producing my twopennorth. 'You ran a check on Sambrooke. He was clean with CRO. But he had some previous trouble with Fortuny which is relevant to your case.'

'Did he now. What was that?'

'A case of common assault. Fortuny brought a charge. Sambrooke was convicted and fined at Bow Street Magistrates' Court on 22 September last year.'

Sinclair stroked his rather stubbly chin. 'Now that's a very convenient tie-up.' He sent me a curious look. 'And did you know that it's just on an assault charge that we are holding the lad now?'

'So I was told.'

'And it's true. I don't like to rush a serious business. But you will understand it is just a matter of time before I come in with a fresh sheet.' He stropped his jaw again. 'And if I may say so, this is a small matter to fetch you from London. It could have gone in the post, man, with the taxpayers putting on the stamp.'

I smiled, but Sinclair stayed poker-faced. 'There is, of course, more to it.'

'So I am thinking.'

'I know the Mackenzies, the family who are involved in the case.'

'Is that so?'

'I knew the girl's father. He used to be a police officer in the Met. I was at his wedding and met his people. I am driving his widow to Kyleness.'

'Then perhaps like that you will be acquainted with Sambrooke.'

I nodded. 'I've met them all except Fortuny. So you see I know the background of the case very well. I thought my knowledge might be of service.'

Sinclair bunched his mouth and stared hard. 'You ken Sambrooke.'

'I've admitted it.'

'You ken the girl is head over heels in love with him and that he is as crazy about the girl.'

'Yes, I know that.'

'So what would you be doing – you, who are such a friend of the family – coming here with information to drive a nail into Sambrooke's coffin?'

I made my face blank. 'Sooner or later you were going to hear about that.'

'Aye, I would. It didn't need you to come fifty miles out of your way.'

I let a glimmer come into my eye. ‘Naturally, I wanted to make the best of it. I’m a friend of the family, and I couldn’t let you think that I was on the wrong side of the fence.’

‘Aha. You are wanting to put your spoke in.’

‘I would sooner come in on your spoke.’

‘You will be for getting this laddie off.’

‘I’ll be for helping you convict on the facts.’

Sinclair wagged his head. ‘You’re a smooth-spoken mannie and I doubt I should not be listening to you. Just tell me one thing. For what single reason would I not be showing you the door?’

‘Because you have doubts yourself about Sambrooke. You would dearly like to see him get off.’

Sinclair did a quick double-take, then he sighed. ‘I’m thinking you’re the man you should be,’ he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HE MOTIONED ME to a chair. We lit our pipes; his was a big, natural briar. He filled it with that tarry-smelling coarse-cut mixture that every Scottish tobacconist keeps a jar of. He lit up with care and puffed solemnly until the pipe began to flavour. His blue eyes were sending me little glances. Outside, the rain kept tumbling down.

'How well do you know this Sambrooke?'

'I doubt if he would use a knife.'

'But he is given to violence.'

'Not to my knowledge. He was provoked when he attacked Fortuny.'

'But he is an excellent sort of liar.'

I shook my head. 'Just the reverse. If Sambrooke told a lie you could spot it straight away.'

Sinclair drew smoothly on his pipe. 'There was a fight, you ken. Sambrooke is free with admitting that. He met Fortuny coming down from the hotel and there were words, and then he thumped him.'

'Any witnesses?'

'None. The road takes a turn there by the cliff. It is blasted out from the rock. There is maybe room to park a car.'

'What's Sambrooke's story?'

'Just that he thumped him.'

'And the knife?'

'He won't have the knife. He says he gave Fortuny a hiding and left him lying insensible by the rocks.'

'How soon was the body found?'

'Straight away. There is a footpath to the road from the quay. Iain Mackenzie was coming up from his boat and he spotted the body at the foot of the cliff. It was trapped by the outlying rocks. Iain Mackenzie rang us. Then he fetched his men from the hotel and they went down on a rope. But Fortuny was dead.'

'Stabbed.'

'Aye, stabbed. He had a couple of wounds in his shoulder. But it was the fall on the rocks that killed him. It is a matter of one hundred and fifty feet.'

'And the knife?'

'We have not found it, and I am thinking we never shall. The murderer would just have tossed it into the sea and it's not a place for putting in divers. It is deep and there's heavy surf. We were lucky the body stuck in the rock. No doubt the intention was to heave it in too, and then likely we would not have seen it again. The blood at the top was scuffed into the ground, and what would have sent us there looking for it?'

I released smoke. 'How soon did you get there?'

'Not more than an hour after it happened. When the patrol car arrived they were

hauling the body up the cliff.'

'What put you on to Sambrooke?'

'The girl was hysterical. She was out with the rest of them on the cliff. One of the patrolmen asked her some questions then Sambrooke jumped in and tried to stop him.'

'So he was arrested.'

Sinclair puffed. 'In the first place for grievous assault on an officer. Duggie Mackay lost a tooth. That is what we are holding the laddie on now.'

'But then he volunteered a statement.'

'Aye.'

'Admitting the fight but denying the murder.'

Sinclair nodded. 'And that he has stuck to through hell and high water. I have been easy with him and tough, and as devious as a man may be. It is all one, you cannot budge him. Yet still the facts call him a liar.'

'Is that your opinion?'

Sinclair hunched his lean shoulders and took several deep pulls. 'It is the knife,' he said at last. 'I cannot get over that. Though it is clean out of character, I am willing to agree.'

'Have you thought that it might have been Fortuny's?'

'Aye. I put it to Sambrooke.'

'Once Fortuny had a knife pulled on him. It may have given him ideas.'

Sinclair eyed me. 'Is that a fact?'

'It's a piece of gossip that came my way.' I didn't think it necessary to mention that the gossip had come from Earle. 'I don't know what you've been told about Fortuny but he had a character both for women and fighting. He was also a person of few scruples. He certainly had enemies besides Sambrooke.'

Sinclair jetted smoke. 'And you'll be telling me?'

I gave him a resumé of what I knew. I told him of the interrupted wedding and of Earle's discovery of a rival in Fortuny. I enlarged on Fortuny's character and described the episode when the knife was pulled. I touched on Verna's machinations and the bribe she had offered Fortuny. Sinclair heard me out silently, with slow, regular draws on his pipe.

'So this Fortuny had a record of violence.'

'I understand he was a tough customer.'

'But Sambrooke clobbered him.'

I nodded. 'He knew what he had to expect from Sambrooke. Sambrooke didn't need a knife. It was Fortuny who stood at risk. And Fortuny who'd had the experience of having a knife used against him.'

'Aye, and he would be expecting trouble if Sambrooke heard what he was up to.'

'He must have anticipated that Sambrooke would be told. He was bound to hear of it through Alex Mackenzie.'

Sinclair fondled his chin. 'But it's a queerish business, what must have gone on up there on the cliff. Because, just mark this, the wounds were behind. That could not have happened in a struggle for the knife.'

I took a few puffs. 'Let us try to reconstruct it. Fortuny pulls a knife on Sambrooke. Sambrooke closes with him just the same and succeeds in getting the knife away from him. Fortuny is grappling with him. He is as big as Sambrooke and his best chance is to stay in close. Sambrooke still has the knife in his hand and in the

grapple it wounds Fortuny's shoulder. Were the wounds deep?'

'Just to the bone. It is the truth that they were not well directed.'

'So then they could have been accidental.'

'Aye, they could. The way you're putting it.'

'Let us say they were. Now Sambrooke drops the knife. He has no intention of killing Fortuny. He struggles to break Fortuny's grip and manages to throw Fortuny off him. But Fortuny is backed towards the cliff.' I paused. 'Is the clifftop fenced at that point?'

'Just a low sort of stone parapet. It would not stop a laddie from blundering over.'

'So over he goes. Sambrooke can't stop him, and the fall to the rocks is certainly fatal. All that Sambrooke can do now is toss the knife after him and get to hell out of there. That's understandable. Nobody is going to believe him if he said he didn't mean to kill Fortuny. When he has to tell his tale he admits to a fight but buttons his lip about the rest.' I stared hard at Sinclair. 'Doesn't that sound credible?'

He shook his head. 'You're a persuasive man. And then you'll be saying it is a matter of manslaughter, and very arguable into the bargain.'

I couldn't help a smile. 'It's an answer to the stab wounds.'

'True. And I could almost see it happening. But would you not think it strange, with this wrestling for the knife, that Sambrooke has no cuts on his fingers?'

'He has none?'

'Not a scratch.'

'It is possible to take a knife without them.'

'Aye, it is. Only it's a great pity that this case should be one of the exceptions. Then again his knuckles are skinned, and the body was bruised about the face. Sambrooke would not have been standing off and hitting him if Fortuny was coming in with a knife.'

'He may have produced the knife later.'

'Aye. There are doubtless ways of looking at it.'

'You're not convinced.'

'I am an open-minded man. I am ready for just any fair submission.'

I struck a fresh light for my pipe and after a pause Sinclair did the same. We sat puffing and silently regarding each other through the heavy wreaths of smoke.

'You had best let me talk to Sambrooke,' I said.

Sinclair nodded. 'So I am thinking.'

'We have got to get that knife on the table.'

'It would be a most material step forward.'

'If it was his there is no more to be said.'

'Aye. It is a case for a good lawyer.'

'I'm trusting that it wasn't.'

'Which I am aware of.'

He reached forward and pressed a button on his desk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

EARLE WAS BROUGHT in. He shuffled through the door in shoes from which the laces had been removed, and his clothes, the same in which he had been arrested, had a grubby, forlorn appearance. His hair was untidy and his pale face bore an expression of brooding resentment; under his right eye there was a bruise and one of his ears was swollen and inflamed. He looked a desperado. He might well have taken his place in any line-up of convicted criminals. The once-engaging chubbiness of his cheeks suggested now only infantile callousness. He caught sight of me; he stared sourly. Then his eyes dropped from mine.

'Sit down. laddie,' Sinclair said dryly. 'I'm thinking you know the Chief Superintendent.'

Earle slouched to the only other chair and slumped on it with affected disdain. Sinclair dismissed the constable who had attended him with an order for coffee and sandwiches. He scraped out his pipe and laid it before him; he took several small ranging looks at Earle. At last he sighed heavily and pushed back his chair from the desk.

'Laddie, you may be fighting me, but you'll be canny not to fight the Chief Super. He's all for getting you out of this with never a scratch on your record. He's come a weary way to see you, so you will not be demeaning yourself by showing gratitude. And though it's against all my judicial principles I am going to let you have a crack in private. What do you say?'

Earle raised his eyes. They were bloodshot and darkened with fatigue. I had no doubt that already he had spent many hours under continual interrogation. His voice was hoarse.

'I didn't ask to see him.'

Anger flickered in Sinclair's gaze. 'No more you did. And no more would I have sent for him if you had asked me till your face was black. But for all that he has come, whether you deserve such a friend or no, and he has prevailed upon me to let him talk to you, and that is what you will be doing.'

'What's the use, fella? He can't help me.'

'Aye, and I am thinking much the same.'

'I'm through with talking, I want to sleep. Just lock me up again in the roundhouse.'

'You will talk to the Chief Super.'

Earle flared. 'Nobody can make me.'

'If you are too ashamed you will just listen. But by the stars you will do that.'

Earle glowered at him, but said nothing. His mouth was set in a bitter drag. I wondered just how tough Sinclair had been with him. Earle was getting to react like a criminal.

'Earle, I'm not here officially,' I said quietly. 'I heard the news about Fortuny

from Verna. Alex rang her and she rang me. Of course she wanted to be with Anne.'

Earle's eyes snapped at me. 'Verna.'

'She drove up with me yesterday from Blockford.'

'I don't want to see her.'

'She's going to Anne. But she wanted me to tell you she was on your side.'

'Fella, I don't want her on my side.'

'I think Verna is feeling pretty guilty.'

Earle sat up and faced me. 'She has a right to feel guilty. She's the key to this whole goddamn mess.'

'She told me about it. It was reprehensible. She didn't want to face you till you'd cooled down. But she's sorry. She acted very stupidly. She was just trying to do her best for Anne.'

'For Anne!'

'She doesn't understand Anne. You mustn't expect too much of people.'

'That woman had better keep away from me for ever.'

'Now she's sorry. She wants to make amends.'

Earle scrubbed his fingers through his tousled hair. I ventured a sidelong glance at Sinclair. He was watching Earle with an appraising eye and no expression on his long features.

'Earle, I think perhaps I can help you.'

'Fella, there's no way out of this mess.'

'I shall need to hear your side of the story. I've only heard it from other people till now.'

'It won't do any good.'

'Once I have the facts I can see better how it fits together. I start with an advantage. We're acquainted. I knew you before this jam happened.'

'You'll be wasting your time.'

'Then I shall go to Kyleness and see if I can fill in the picture there. I'll be talking to Colin's people, of course. And Alex. And Anne.'

His fists clenched. 'They all think I did it.'

'That's just the impression you had at the time.'

'No. Do you think I think I couldn't tell?'

'I doubt whether anyone was thinking very clearly.'

'That's talking crazy.' He banged his fists together. 'OK – if you want to tease the animal. I guess I've been through it enough times now, I could turn on the record in my sleep.'

Sinclair rose softly. 'That's sensible,' he said. 'Now you're behaving like a douce laddie. It is a wise man who kens his friends and takes a counsel when it is offered. I will just be hastening them on with the coffee, and you ken you can smoke if you wish it. There is just no hurry at all. You press the button on the desk when you need me.'

He took silent, exaggerated steps to the door, which just then was opened by the constable, with a tray. Sinclair slid round it, his body vanished, but for a moment his face remained. He winked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I TOOK SINCLAIR'S seat at the desk – the other two chairs were less luxurious – and poured the coffee, which had been supplied in a generous earthenware jug. With it had come a stack of beef sandwiches: I divided the pile into two. Earle dragged his chair to the desk ungraciously but wasted no time in beginning on the sandwiches. I let him eat undisturbed. I wanted to give him time to begin feeling more normal. The effect of interrogation and incarceration is to make the world outside seem distant and shadowy. The only people one sees are enemies and their attitude that of condemnation. With Earle I needed to break through this, to let him feel himself a person again. So we ate silently; I wondered whether Verna had braved the rain and found her way to a hotel.

Earle's thoughts apparently were also on Verna and when he had finished eating he returned to the subject. In a slightly less edgy voice he said:

'I'll bet it was Verna who got you up here.'

I grinned over my coffee. 'She was instrumental, I have to admit.'

'I can imagine. And I'll bet it was the first time you had heard from her for six months.'

'Eight, for the record.'

'She's seeing it like this, fella. She's one down and one to play. If it wasn't for that I could rot for ever. That's all the use I am to Verna.'

I chuckled. 'I seem to remember you had a different opinion of her once.'

Earle jerked his head. 'I guess I must have had some stardust in my eyes. But that was a thousand years ago. It's like on the other side of the moon. I was someone else. Now I'm nobody. I just walk and talk but there's nothing inside.'

'You have had what is described as a traumatic experience.'

'That's only noises and you know it. I'm knackered. I can never get back to where I was last June. One day the stuffing dropped clean out of me. Christ, I don't know who I am.'

I shrugged. 'Then you're in the same position as the rest of us.'

'Yeah?' His grey eyes admonished mine.

'We don't know who we are. We simply walk and talk with nothing inside.'

'That's poppycock.'

'No it isn't. Nobody can grasp their own identity. They build an image of themselves as a practical utility. But it's only a fiction. The reality is the emptiness that seems to bother you. You go searching for an object where the only object is the search.'

Earle was silent for a moment. 'You mean I'm nothing anyway?'

'I mean you are nothing you can grasp. You weren't then and you aren't now. You are simply free of a fixed identity. It isn't something you can keep or lose. The whole concept is superfluous. All you need do is to turn your back.'

He gazed at me. ‘That’s too easy!’

‘Which doubtless is why most people never try it.’

‘You’re saying nothing I’ve ever been is me?’

‘As much as you want it to be, and no more.’

He sat quite still, his eyes fascinated. A little of the hangdog look had left him. I imagined that Earle had not yet met with the Buddhist metaphysic and that temporarily it was jolting him from his compulsive occupations. Suddenly, he had glimpsed that they were strangely irrelevant. But his unripe enlightenment faded again.

‘I’m still left with the consequences, fella.’

‘Perhaps now we have had lunch we can look into that.’

‘I’m guilty as hell.’

‘Is that a confession?’

He hunched his shoulders and reached for his cup.

‘Let’s take it in order, Earle,’ I said. ‘I want you to go back to the beginning. Verna told Alex that Fortuny was going to marry Anne. Then Alex passed it on. Tell me about that.’

Earle took a long swig of coffee. ‘Well, I was in the top studios,’ he said. ‘I’ve been working on a new magazine programme, I haven’t seen much of Alex of late. He came up, it was first thing. He said he had something urgent to tell me. I’ve got an office I use and we went in there. He told me that if I still loved Anne I had better get up here.’

‘He made that suggestion?’

Earle nodded. ‘But I didn’t need much shoving. Once I’d heard what was going on I was ready to jump out of the window.’

‘He told you that Anne had had Fortuny’s baby.’

Earle’s face was grim. ‘Right.’

‘That Verna had kept in touch with Fortuny.’

‘Right.’

‘That she had persuaded him to marry Anne.’

Earle’s fists were clenching tight. ‘He told me how she’d persuaded him. Like one hundred grand in tobacco shares. I’ll tell you one thing about Verna. She had that louse weighed up to a cent.’

‘Alex quoted the actual figure.’

‘One hundred grand. The rest of Verna’s loot is invested in property. She let on to Alex that she was staking Fortuny and he got out of her with what.’

Which made Verna a liar, and set me wondering why she had told this particular lie.

‘Did Alex say anything else about the money?’

‘No.’

‘But he did urge you to go to Kyleness.’

‘He said that if I didn’t get up there fast Fortuny would pressure Anne into accepting him.’

‘Did you believe that?’

Earle rolled his shoulders. ‘Christ, how did I know what to believe? She’d had his baby. Verna was carrying the torch for him. I hadn’t heard from Anne for nearly a year. If she was the same Anne that I used to know she wouldn’t have let Fortuny through the door, but was she the same? I didn’t know. I couldn’t be sure I had ever

known her.'

'She's the same.'

'I know that now.' He drew breath in a deep sigh. 'But it's too late again. She's sure I killed him. Just beating the rap won't make any difference.'

I shook my head. 'Just keep on trusting her.'

'I wish I knew how to believe that.'

'I can trust her. Why not you?'

He sat staring over his knees at Sinclair's linoleum.

I poured the last of the coffee: it was strong and very sweet. Sinclair had given Earle permission to smoke and at a venture I pulled open a desk drawer and found a pack of Manikins. I gave one to Earle. He took it mechanically; I reached across with a light. There were plasters on three of his fingers and his hands looked puffy and bruised.

'Did Alex offer to go with you?'

'No.'

'He mentioned nothing about going up too?'

'Nothing.' Earle hesitated. 'But with the state I was in he might have said something and I didn't notice it.'

'He must have left soon afterwards.'

'I'd reckon so.'

'Verna says he hoped to catch you on the road.'

'I drove like smoke. I just kept going till I was whacked and knew I couldn't make it.'

'Where did that happen?'

'At Pitlochry. I got a room at the Hydro.'

'Alex was driving a sports car.'

'So what? I was busting ninety a lot of the time.'

What I wanted to know but didn't was how long after Earle Alex had left. Pitlochry was seventy miles on from Stirling, but that was only an hour-and-a-half's driving time.

'How soon were you on the road the next morning?'

'Around nine a.m. I overslept.'

'Then you drove straight through. By Lairg.'

'It was another couple of hundred miles.'

'But no sign of Alex.'

'I told you, fella. And I surely would have seen him. You can see that road for miles and there was damn-all traffic. Alex drives a white MGB.'

I nodded and sipped coffee. But I made a note to get a precise timetable from Alex. When the journey times had run each other so close I wanted a very clear picture of what had happened. Another point occurred to me. On his way north Alex would have passed Blockford. He could very well have picked up his mother and taken her with him to this critical confrontation. Why didn't he? Was it so important that he overtook Earle, or arrived along with him?

'What time did you get to Kyleness?'

'I'm not sure. That goddamn road seems to go on for ever. It was around three or four p.m. You have to drive slowly over the last part.'

'You went straight to James Mackenzie's house.'

Earle nodded. It's a big stone house looking over the bay. I guess I went in there

like a madman. I don't feel proud of the way I behaved. The old man opened the door. He's a hell of a character. I shoved him aside and bawled for Anne. Then his wife and his daughter-in-law came out, and the old man poked me one on the jaw. Then Anne came. She was paler than a ghost. We stood there staring at each other.'

Earle drew hard on the Manikin.

'But you did get to talk to her.'

He nodded again. 'We got round to it. I guess the old man could see how things were, he shoved the lot of us into the parlour. Anne was crying. The two women were comforting her. The old man was taking it all in. I was carrying on that I loved her and that I was going to marry her and that I wouldn't shift from there until she said yes. But she wouldn't say yes. She just cried. Then she said she couldn't and I knew why. And I said I loved her and I didn't care why and I knew she loved me. She went on crying.' He stabbed the Manikin in Sinclair's ashtray. 'But she did, she did love me. I knew it as soon as we set eyes on each other. Nothing had changed. Anne loved me.

'Then what makes you think it has changed since?'

His head sank. 'What happened on the cliff.'

'She'd forgive you that.'

'I wouldn't want her to forgive me. That would mean she still thought I was guilty.'

'Listen, Earle,' I said. 'You must give her a chance. I'm told she was hysterical after it happened. You wouldn't have been so very coherent yourself. You can't insist on Anne's being superhuman.'

'She didn't believe in me.'

'You had better stop blaming her.'

He gave me a quick, wounded look. Then he shrugged weakly. 'I guess you're right. Me being unfair isn't going to help any.'

'Get on with what happened at the Mackenzies'.'

He reached for his cup with a sulky expression. He took a couple of slow mouthfuls, his eyes distant and resenting.

'She ran out of the room.'

'That doesn't surprise me.'

'The daughter-in-law went with her. Then the grandmother began to scold me. She was laying it on hot and strong. But the old boy suddenly turned on her like a devil out of hell. He ordered her out too. She didn't say another word.'

'James Mackenzie is a man of decision.'

'You don't have to tell me that. After she'd gone he stood staring at me as though he could see clear through my skull. Then he went to a cupboard in the wall and poured a couple of noggins of Scotch. He gave me one. We touched glasses. He came out with something fierce in what I took to be Gaelic.'

'I think you were being honoured.'

Earle grimaced. 'It sounded more like a curse to me. But I'll tell you this, it fetched me up short. I was as quiet as a lamb after that. "So you're the Canadian laddie," he said. "The young man that Anne has set her heart on. Well, you have left it a bit late, my mannie" – I can't do his crazy accent. I told him that I hadn't known where Anne was, that her people had kept it from me. "Aye, it will be that Verna," he said, and it surely sounded like he thought she should drop dead. He frowned and grumbled for a while. "So what will you be doing about it?" he said. "You're Anne's

man, that's certain, but you have not been acting very clever." I told him that I was going to marry her and that nothing would stop me. "Aye, but the lassie may stop you," he said. "She has got the pride of the family in her, and she will not thole bringing you another man's bairn. More like she will listen to yon cunning fellow, and that in despite of herself and you. So if you are her man you had best behave like it and take the old way with the matter." I must have gaped at him. "What's the old way?" "Ach, laddie," he said. "Can you be so thick? You will just be for running this Fortuny out of town, and making dooms certain that he never comes back." '

Earle paused, his brows knitting and his bruised hands slowly opening and closing. He glanced at me. I guessed what he was thinking: that he was opening up rather naively to a man who was also a policeman. I smiled faintly.

'It can't be hid that you thumped him. Your motive for doing it was never in doubt. If you didn't kill him you had better tell me everything. That's the only way I can be of help.'

He nodded doubtfully. 'It's a hell of a good case. I'm not being bright to make it a better one.'

'It rests with you. You know what happened.'

He drew a long breath and jutted out his lips.

'Well, you can take it how you like. But that's what old Mackenzie said to me. And I guess it doesn't make any odds because I was going to bash that louse anyway. But somehow it gave me a good feeling to have the old man on my side. He's a great lad. It wasn't his fault that things turned out the way they did.' Earle sent me another look.

'Did James Mackenzie help you to set up this encounter with Fortuny?'

Earle hunched a shoulder. 'Maybe he did. He didn't want the ruckus going on at the family hotel.'

'This is important, Earle. Did James Mackenzie choose the place where you were to meet?'

'All right, he did. But he wasn't there. It was just Fortuny and myself.'

'How did he do it?'

'He rang Fortuny. Told him Anne was ready to make a decision. Told him to walk down to the house. Told him that someone was coming to meet him. Then he sent me up the road and told me to wait in the bend. There was room there to have it out and nobody would see us or interrupt us.'

'I take it that the hotel is outside the village.'

'You pass the hotel coming in. The road runs along beside a big sea loch, then it takes this turn down to the village. The Mackenzie house is up on a slope a few hundred yards from the bend. I had plenty of time to get there after the old man had made his call.'

'Did you pass anyone on the way.'

'No. There may have been someone at the quay.'

'Is that far away?'

'It's right down below there. About half a mile, if you follow the road.'

'Do you pass any houses or buildings?'

'The ground slopes straight down to the quay. You're climbing up a gradient towards the bend and the road there is cut through the rock.'

'So nobody saw you going there.'

'I guess they didn't, unless they watched me from the house.'

I nodded. ‘Go on from there. You were first to arrive at the bend.’

Earle shifted position a little. ‘Well, I had to wait for about five minutes. It’s a queer sort of place. They’ve blasted a lot of rock to give room for two vehicles to pass each other. On the seaward side there are big splinter pillars, then further round a low wall. Down below the sea is pounding the rocks and all the time it echoes in the bend.’

‘Didn’t that seem a dangerous spot for a fight?’

He shook his head. ‘I’m describing it badly. It’s on a gradient. The wide part is down in the rocks, away from the cliff edge.’

‘And that’s where you waited – down there.’

His eyes were steady. ‘That’s where.’

‘You didn’t go further up, anticipating Fortuny?’

‘I didn’t do that. I waited below.’

‘Carry on.’

‘I heard him whistling. I guess he was thinking he had it made. He was whistling *Bonnie Dundee* – Fortuny was that sort of a ham. Then he came round the shoulder of the rock. He was prancing along like a Boy Scout. He was grinning all over his face. A moment later he saw me.’

‘Where was he when he saw you?’

‘About thirty yards off.’

‘Did you start towards him?’

‘I swear I didn’t. I just kept standing down there in the bend. We were never near the cliff edge at any time.’

Now there was a gleam of sweat on his forehead and his eyes were not on me. That didn’t mean he was lying. A liar will often stare at you, trying to compel you to believe what he says. But a man who is telling truth that he thinks you won’t credit finds it difficult to meet your eye. The disbelief he expects to find there is too crushing. He would sooner not witness your condemnation.

‘He came down to you.’

‘He stopped. He went on whistling a few bars. He kept grinning. He was acting like he was amused to find me there. I didn’t know what to do about it. You can’t walk up to a man who is grinning at you and take a poke at him. And suddenly it struck me like hell that I might have got it wrong, that he really loved Anne, and she him. That’s all balls, and I know it now. But it was what came over me at the time.’ He jerked a hand across his moist brow. ‘He came on down. He was smiling as though he were meeting his best friend. He said something like “Fancy meeting you here”.’ Earle touched his bruised cheek. ‘Then the bloody skunk hit me.’

‘He hit *you?’*

‘He hit me. He just smiled in my face and hit me. Like he was doing me the biggest favour. He bloody near knocked my head off.’

His eyes jumped to mine now and there was no questioning the sincerity of their indignation. Fortuny had played it dirty to the last; which slotted into the character I had of him.

‘And then the knife came out,’ I suggested casually.

Earle’s eyes widened. ‘But there never was one.’

‘After he hit you he drew a knife. Fortuny didn’t want to tangle with you.’

‘But he didn’t have a knife.’

‘Then it was your knife.’ I said. ‘It jerked out of your pocket when he hit you and

Fortuny snatched it up.'

Earle's eyes were rimmed with white. 'That's – crazy nonsense!'

'You had better tell me which way it was. There's no doubt about the knife. Fortuny had stab wounds. It's simply a question of how the knife came into it.'

Earle jumped to his feet. 'Fella, I'm telling you—!'

'Sit down,' I said coolly. 'Don't get excited. A knife was used, that's on the record. All we have to do is to explain it.'

'But I'm telling you for ever, there wasn't—!'

'Denying it is simply holding us up. We can't change the facts. But we can try to understand them. We must know if the knife was his or yours.'

Earle leaned on his fists on the desk, panting. 'Christ, I thought you were my friend!' he burst out. 'You're not. You're just another rotten policeman. You've come to nail me with the knife like all the rest. You're a bloody Judas, that's what you are. You're lower even than Sinclair. Nobody can have a policeman for a friend. It's like trying to chum up with a rattlesnake.'

I smiled up at him. 'No knife.'

'For the umpteenth bloody time – no!'

'Then we seem to have settled that.'

He dropped back on his chair. 'You bastard,' he said 'You unspeakable bastard.'

I let him glare at me for a while. I thought I had the truth about the knife. And the truth about the knife was, by corollary, the truth about Earle's story. If Earle hadn't stabbed Fortuny then it was unlikely that he had thrown him over the cliff; the way was clear for a third person hypothesis. That was what the knife was telling us now. Earle gave a snort.

'You look so damned complacent. You're like a kid who's swiped some candy.'

'I was thinking that if Fortuny had been sensible he would have gone on his way after landing that punch.'

'Well, he didn't. And do you know why?'

'He wanted to put paid to you, too. If he thrashed the daylights out of you, you'd be in no shape to interfere.'

Earle scowled. 'He came in after me. I'd gone down among the rocks. I guess he was trying to do that fool flop-act that fight-arrangers teach these mugs. So I stuck my knee in his guts. That kept him quiet till my head had cleared. Then when I got up he tried to wrestle me and hit me inside. That was hurting. He was a strong monkey. I had to break out of the clinch. I poked my fingers into his eyes and made him let go. That's when I had him.'

'I take it that Fortuny wasn't a boxer.'

'He was just a rough-houser. Once I stood off I could hit him. And fella, I hit him. I put together punches that I never knew I had. He kept rushing me with roundhouse swings and trying to poke his skull in my face, but I was never there, I was all round him, I was picking him off from all the angles.'

'It was just you and him.'

Earle broke off to stare. 'What are you getting at now?'

'While this was going on you were quite alone. Nobody was watching you from round the corner.'

He hesitated. 'Are you saying they were?'

'I am asking for your impressions.'

He looked blank. 'I'm giving you my impressions. They were all tied up with

busting Fortuny.'

'Carry on then.'

He paused again, to continue with less bravado. 'I punched that louse around and he scarcely laid a fist on me. I guess it went on for five minutes. He was getting blown and punched out. He was coming in with his hands lower and his chin hanging out like a line of washing. So I hit it; a right hook. He was cold before he reached the deck.'

'Which way did he fall?'

'He fell against the rocks and rolled over on to his face.'

'Did you touch him after that?'

'Like hell I did. By then I needed a breather myself. But he was alive, I can tell you that. He was out cold but he was breathing. And he was yards away from the cliff edge, so he couldn't have come to and rolled himself over.'

'How long did you remain there after the knock-out?'

'I stood a minute getting my breath.'

'You heard or saw nothing that suggested a witness.'

Earle shook his head. 'It was just me and him.'

'You realize how important that is.'

'I surely realize it. If it wasn't me then it was someone else.'

'Fortuny was unlikely to have been unconscious for very long.'

'I'm sorry, fella. I saw nobody.'

Which was provoking. It would have been a significant step if I could have established my third person's presence. I tried to visualize all that Earle had told me about the configuration of the spot. The time element was critical. It was a fair hypothesis that the killer had arrived while Fortuny was unconscious. He would have come upon him as Earle described and plunged his knife into Fortuny's exposed back. Then, with Fortuny still unconscious, and perhaps seemingly dead, he had hauled him to the parapet and dumped him over. The killer must have been very close during the fight. But until I had actually seen the place I could get no further.

'When you talk of a minute is that about what you mean?'

Earle shrugged. 'I didn't put a stopwatch on it. But I guess it wasn't any more. I just got my wind back and left.'

'You returned directly to the Mackenzie house.'

'Sure.'

'Did you meet or see anyone on the way?'

'Not that I remember. But you can see a long way, so there may have been people who I didn't notice. I met old Mackenzie standing at his gate. I guess he was keen to know how I'd made out. He looked me over, weighing up the damage, then he slapped me on the back and said I'd do brawly.'

'Who else was watching out for you?'

'His wife was in the porch. Anne and the daughter-in-law stood at a window.'

'Those were all the people you had seen at the house.'

'Well, there was the maid. I saw her later.'

'But no other men.'

Earle's shoulder twitched. 'Not till the son came in with the news.'

'How soon was that?'

He frowned. 'It couldn't have been more than half an hour afterwards. They took me into the parlour and gave me whisky and the old lady and the maid bathed my

bruises. I was shaky. The old man was bubbling over. Anne just sat looking pale and staring at me. I wanted to talk to her, but I couldn't. I guess I was somehow feeling ashamed. I wanted to grab her and hold her tight but I just couldn't get out a word. I felt that what I'd done had altered everything and that I could only wait till she made her move.' He wet his lips. 'The son came in. He gave me a queer look. He said: "There's a body down the cliff. I've got the men going after it. It looks like Fortuny." Nobody said anything for a moment.' Earle turned his face aside. 'Anne jumped up. She shouted: "Oh lord, you've killed him!" They all looked at me. And I couldn't speak.'

'That was a natural reaction.'

'They believed I'd done it, fella. Especially Anne.'

'But you would have thought the same if you had been one of them. It's the first conclusion you would have jumped to. The news was a shock. These people feared for you. Anne's fear was stronger than the rest.'

'I wanted the ground to open.'

'She was terrified for you. You might have put yourself in deadly jeopardy. And she was conscious of being in part to blame. Her first reaction was inevitable.'

He sat hunched over the chair. 'That was the worst moment. I never, never want to live it again. I don't care who believes what now. She believed it then. She'll never be certain.'

I gave up. The experience was probably still too close for Earle to begin to see it objectively. It was perhaps just as well that his arrest had prevented him from attempting an *éclaircissement* with Anne. Clearly he was shaping a grudge against her. He needed time to understand that it was unjust. Her cry had come from her fear; she had not been disloyal. She would find bitter enough censure in her own thoughts.

'You would have been too absorbed in your own emotions to notice the reactions of the others in greater detail.'

He chewed his lip. 'So maybe I didn't. I guess you've never been accused of murder.'

'What was James Mackenzie's attitude?'

'The devil knows.'

'Did he express regret at getting you into a jam?'

'He said something about it being no canny and that we'd best watch out what we said to the pollis.'

'And Iain Mackenzie?'

'He said he'd rung the police. He said he'd warned the men to keep their mouths shut.'

'About what?'

'About me, I guess. Everyone seemed to know what had happened.'

'Iain Mackenzie knew it.'

'He acted like he did. Nobody had to give him any explanations. When he came in he was looking round for me. I guess they have bush-telegraph up there.'

They would also have the common, everyday telephone: I made a note to check if there was one on the quay.

'What happened then?'

'Well, Iain Mackenzie bolted out again, and the rest of us followed him. A lot of other people were running up the road from the village. At the top of the cliff there was a crowd. The fishermen had set up a tripod with a block. They had lowered a

man down to the rocks and he was fixing a bowline round the body.'

'They were Mackenzie's men?'

'I guess so. The trawler was moored down at the quay. Iain Mackenzie was giving orders and leaning over shouting to the man below. They attached a steadying line to the body to stop it swinging as it came up. They were just pulling it over the wall when the police car arrived.'

'Where were you?'

'I was leaning against the rocks, looking green.'

'Who spoke to the policeman?'

'The old man principally, with the son putting in a word. And Alex, of course.'

I paused. 'Alex?'

'He was up there on the cliff. I guess he had just arrived. He would have seen the crowd and left his car along the road.'

'Did he speak to you?'

'No.'

'What was he saying to the police?'

'I didn't hear. Perhaps about Fortuny. He could tell them more about him than anyone.'

'Anne was with Alex?'

'She was near him. She was crying and carrying on about it being her fault. So of course the policemen began to take an interest. I guess Alex had filled them in on the situation.' He drew one of his deep sighs. 'I hadn't dared to go over to her, I could feel it would only provoke an outburst, but suddenly that seemed just crazy, I had to be there, to be beside Anne, to stand up with her. And when that red-haired copper started to bully her something clicked. I couldn't help it.'

'You went across and hit him.'

Earle hung his head. 'That was the end. They took me in.'

'You did knock his tooth out.'

He nodded. 'I heard the next morning in the Sheriff's Court. But fella, that was nothing. They were on to me directly. I don't know who spilled the dirt. It didn't seem to matter, not with Anne turned against me. So I just told them what they wanted to know.'

I made a face. 'Did you have legal advice?'

'I saw the duty solicitor when I went to court.'

'But that would have been after you'd made your statement.'

'What's the difference? I was going to get if off my chest anyway.'

I was silent. We had talked it to a standstill, and yet still there seemed something to be asked, some seminal question the answer to which would produce a glint of illumination. But I could not devise it. I had, I was sure, as clear a picture as Earle could give me. I believed he had withheld nothing from me, or nothing I had asked, or that his common sense had prompted. And yet my instinct was uneasy. I felt I had not got to grips with the problem. I was seeing more and more of the surface but I was not convinced that I had got far beneath it. I have learned to respect premonitions of this kind because I have often found them to be preludes to a breakthrough, but though I tinkered with the present one it yielded no inspiration and I was left merely to acknowledge it in my mental notes. I threw out a last feeler.

'Is there anything else you think I should know?'

His grey eyes met mine uncertainly; there was a flush on his bruised face. 'You'll

be talking to Anne, won't you?'

I had tensed slightly; now I relaxed. 'We shall be in Kyleness this evening. I will be happy to take a message.'

'Do you think I killed him?'

'No.'

His eyes dropped. 'Thanks. You had better forget how I sounded off. I'm goddamn lucky to have you bother with me.

'I don't think Anne will need to be told.'

'But you'll tell her, George – you will tell her.'

I nodded. 'Anything else?'

'I'm not worth her old boots. But tell her I love her.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I RANG THE bell and the constable entered to escort Earle back to his cell. When Sinclair reappeared he was carrying a fresh tray on which was a pot of tea. I made to vacate the comfortable chair, but he nodded me to keep seated. He poured the tea, sat, and lit his pipe; there was a lurking gleam in his eye.

'That was a most perceptive session you just had.'

I sipped my tea and said nothing. It had never occurred to me that my interview with Earle would not be eavesdropped. Between the office and reception there was a hatch; I had watched it silently, imperceptibly open. It had remained ajar about half an inch and I thought that once I had heard the scuffle of a pencil. Then it had as silently closed again when I pressed the button on the desk. The next thing that happened to Earle after I left would be a rigorous amending of his statement.

'Aye,' Sinclair mused. 'A Judas he calls you. That was an unkind thing to be saying. And you twisting his arm out of pure benevolence. I fear the laddie has an uncharitable nature.'

'I trust your monitoring arrangement was adequate.'

'I heard every word.' Sinclair drew on his pipe. 'And may I say it was an object lesson. It deserved to be recorded for the edification of the ignorant. But your theory's gone, man. You could not fetch in the knife. We are no further forward than when I last sat here. I will allow that you drew out more detail, but that's just embroidery without the knife.'

I sipped tea. 'The knife came in later.'

'Aye, I was certain you would say so. But there again we have a hypothesis in no way supported by a fact.'

'You still believe that Sambrooke is lying?'

His eyes twinkled. 'I have not said that. And if you will have the precise truth of the matter, I have not much doubted the laddie from the start.'

I stared. 'You didn't give that impression.'

His big mouth hoisted into a grin. 'I was not exactly for putting my cards on the table – not till I had seen what the Englishman was up to.'

I sipped more tea. 'And now you know it?'

'Now I know it I'm placed in a queer sort of quandary. I have a notion that you could be a great help to me. But I'm not that sure of the wisdom of asking you.'

'You mean you don't trust me.'

'Ach no, I would not put it just like that!'

'But I do have bias.'

'I ken you're a policeman. I can count upon you on the article of duty.'

He puffed solemnly, and I sipped. I thought I could guess what he was after. He removed his pipe a couple of times, but then replaced it and continued smoking. At last he reached for his neglected cup and took a long, cautious sip.

‘How well do you know these Mackenzies? I’m thinking you will not have seen so much of them.’

‘I knew the son, Colin. I met the others at his wedding.’

‘You have not visited Kyleness before?’

‘I have never been further north than Edinburgh.’

‘That’s a sad thing to be admitting, man.’

‘I must confess to a narrow education.’

He drew a few more wary puffs. ‘You will not be exactly close to them, then. In fact, if the downright truth is spoken, you are a stranger both to them and the country.’

I allowed a nod.

‘But you’ll be welcome, I’m thinking. A man like you at a time like this. And they’ll not forget you were a friend of the son’s, and stood his man when he was wed.’

‘They impressed me as warm-hearted people.’

‘Aye, they are, and none more so. But a good friend can be a bad enemy, and that’s a lesson you may learn hereaways. Where you are going is a far country. There was never coach or train seen there. It is a place at the end of a chancy road and a long twenty miles from the next habitation. On Tuesdays and Fridays there is a mail-bus, but it ceases to run with the first snow. After that it’s by boat or helicopter that folks come and go from Kyleness. And this you ken. The Mackenzies have lived there since the days of the Union and before. There is not a fisherman or crofter in Kyleness that is not a Mackenzie or calls them cousin. They own the land, they own the Biggins, they own a braw new modern trawler. It is Mackenzie’s Kingdom out there, man, down to the last tile of peat.’

He drew hard on his pipe: his eyes behind it were assessing me. I helped myself to some more of the tea and kept my face a complete blank. Sinclair whirled his large hand.

‘Take it from our point of view, now. We get this phone call from Iain Mackenzie to say there is a body at the foot of the cliff. We send a car, and what do we find? We find Iain Mackenzie along with his crew – they are hauling the body up the cliff – it’s hot, it has not been dead for an hour. And who should have found it? Just this same Iain, coming up alone from his boat in the harbour – though it might well have waited there for the hoodies if he had not strayed a little from the path. And who is the culprit? Nobody kens that has the surname of Mackenzie. It was but the greeting of the lassie that put our hands on Sambrooke’s shoulder.’

‘Then you think they knew.’

‘You heard the laddie. It was a point you were bringing out yourself. Iain kent him, who had never seen him, and kent he was back from a punch-up with Fortuny. It was all round the town – aye, and before Sambrooke ever threw a punch. There was not a soul that day in Kyleness who kentna a fight was going on in the turn.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘Now listen to this. I have not been backward in making inquiries. I can tell you that Fortuny was gravely misliked for what he was doing up in Kyleness. He was the father of the child – fine. He had a right to seek to do the honest thing. He had a right to be admitted to the house and to represent himself to the lassie. But the lassie could not stand him, and he took no heed of it. He took no heed of hints from the family. And he gave a deal of deadly offence with his speak-me-fair-stab-my-back southron manners.’ Sinclair took an emphatic puff. ‘And this is what is going

through my mind. I am thinking that whether Sambrooke came here or stayed in London, Fortuny might have finished up at the foot of a cliff.'

He stared at me fiercely, with smoke trickling from his nostrils. I conceded the compliment of a shrug. I could sense that it required no small resolution to broach such a theory to one like myself.

It had come to that stage.'

'Aye, so I read it. And mark this – the trawler was back there that day. It had been away fishing the whole week before and was lying at Ullapool the previous night.'

'James Mackenzie recalled it.'

'Doesna that fit, man? If there was anything afoot it called for Iain. And just that afternoon he tied up there, him and his close-mouthed, hard-drinking crew. And if you're looking for knives you need go no further – you ken of your own knowledge how it is with fishermen.'

'But meanwhile Sambrooke had arrived.'

'And you heard how the old man handled that. If Jack Solomons himself had been biding at Kyleness he could not have promoted a fight better. And I have a passable notion why, apart from Fortuny getting a drubbing. It was that if anything unco should happen to Fortuny, Sambrooke for one would be keeping his mouth shut. Well, it did not work out quite so. We nabbed Sambrooke and took him hostage. I have no doubt that they wish to see the laddie cleared, but bear in mind that it will not be at any price. First the Mackenzies look after their own – that's the way of the world at Kyleness.'

I kept every expression out of my face. 'And this is where you think I can help you.'

Sinclair's head weaved. 'You have a privileged position there. And you are not the man to let it slip.'

'With me they won't be so close-mouthed.'

'Aye, it's a credible proposition.'

'They will take me for a friend.'

'You'll pass fine.'

'But meanwhile, I shall be reporting to you.'

He gave me a long, long look; then rose abruptly and went to the window. For a while he stood stiffly, with his back to me, staring out at the rainswept street. He turned suddenly.

'Well – very well. You're still for playing it like a careful mannie. And no doubt you are right. Putting other things aside, it is not a reasonable matter for me to be asking. And yet . . .', he came back to his chair, and there was a twinkle in his eye, 'and yet I am thinking that you may not entirely have got a grip of what I'm after.'

I continued wooden. 'You want me to inform on them.'

He shook his head. 'That's not just the way of it. But I am for sewing this business up on the easiest terms that come to hand.' He leaned closer. 'You want Sambrooke out of it. That is precisely for what I am asking. Just a shred of reasonable doubt, and we'll let it hang at Mackay's tooth.'

I held his eyes. 'You won't press charges?'

'Man, do I have to spell it out for you? If this affair is Mackenzie business we shall never get near to pressing charges. We have no evidence and there will be no confessions. It will just stay comfortable and circumstantial. We can maybe hazard a canny guess, but nothing the Sheriff will take two looks at.'

‘What about the press?’

‘Never fear the press. The press about here are douce bodies. There’s a rumour going round that the death was an accident – I kenna exactly how it took the air.’

I couldn’t help smiling a little at that. Sinclair seized on my change of expression.

‘Then you’ll do it?’

‘I think Sambrooke is innocent. I’m willing to pass on any findings that support him.’

‘Ach, you will need to be canny.’

‘I shall certainly be canny. The Mackenzies are still by way of being my friends. Also I’m not sure that I share your suspicions. They don’t altogether square with what I heard from Sambrooke.’

Sinclair looked doubtful for a moment, but the next he was grabbing my hand. ‘You will do your best,’ he said. ‘I ken that. And you have shown yourself a person with a rare capacity.’

‘Have you a man at Kyleness?’

‘Aye, Robertson. You will find him at the hotel. I shall ring to let him know you are coming.’

‘Just that and no more,’ I said.

Sinclair nodded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

AND SO IT was that I left the police station at Dornoch in a more sanguine frame of mind than when I had entered it. I had gone up the steps as an interfering Englishman and I was coming down them again as an accredited auxiliary. Not that I was uncritically elated by that. I suspected the wisdom of trusting Sinclair unconditionally. I was flattered to find him agreeing with me that Earle was innocent but I felt obliged to consider what advantages it was bringing him. It meant, in brief, that he had got me on his side. I was going to interfere, so he proposed to have the benefit. I was friendly with the Mackenzies: they might not implicate themselves but they might well drop some damaging hints about Earle. And I was a policeman; I would feel constrained to pass on what I had learned. Certainly, if I happened on evidence of Earle's guilt I would at least reveal a change in my attitude towards him. That would be enough. Though I shut my mouth tight Sinclair would know he was safe to go ahead, and even though the evidence never came to hand I imagined that he was good enough to get a conviction. The Mackenzies were his lure. He had judged rightly that my first sympathies lay with Earle. He had played on this, and had drawn me a picture of circumstantial evidence against the former. I grinned: I didn't blame him. Rather, I admired his handling of the cards. A man less adroit would have tried to choke me off and perhaps have antagonized me by using threats. Sinclair was canny, he was a good policeman, but I couldn't rely on him to show favour to Earle.

Nor did I feel it would be wise, on the other hand, to discount his insinuations against the Mackenzies. Sinclair had loaded them, but he had revealed some interesting circumstances by the way. The arrival of the trawler would bear looking into, and so would the movements of her crew. It would be pertinent to know why Iain Mackenzie was walking up from the quay alone. The body had indeed been found very promptly and its recovery had proceeded with surprising dispatch. When the arrival of the patrol car was imminent one would have expected the body to have been undisturbed. If the Mackenzie house was in communication with the quay that would explain Iain's knowledge of the fight, but why had Iain remained at the quay until, or after, he had received the intelligence? Sinclair of course would have covered this ground and might have information that he had not given me; but when the country appeared so fertile I would be a fool not to plough my own furrow. In all, I felt I was primed for a profitable descent on Kyleness, and I braved the rain again with eagerness to be on my way.

Verna was waiting in the car; she was boredly leafing through a magazine.

'Well?'

'I've seen Earle, and spoken to the officer in charge of the case.'

'And *I've* been to lunch, and got wet, and waited for three solid hours.'

'Two and a half.'

'Three. My God, if I'd known I'd have come in too. Of course Earle would have

been rude and desperately unfair to me, but that would have been better than watching the rain.' She slid me a look. 'What did he say about me?'

'He was just being rude and desperately unfair.'

'Beast.'

'It's a failing of young people to be frank and over-exacting.'

She bit her lip. 'You think I'm a bitch, don't you?'

I strapped myself in but said nothing.

'Perhaps I am. But the point is that I shall have to live with Earle if he marries Anne.'

I started the engine. 'He'll simmer down.'

'Yes, but there'll be all sorts of ructions first. You know what a filthy temper he has, and Anne will only make matters worse. And really I was only doing my best. I was simply trying to be a good mother. There's no justice. All I've left to hope for is that he'll take her back to Canada.'

There were genuine tears in Verna's eyes and she borrowed my handkerchief to prove it. I was touched, but I felt it would be unmannerly to interrupt such artless grief. I switched on the wipers and drove away. There was no break in the wrack overhead. We left Dornoch as we had found it, in twilight and torrents, and pointed our bonnet to the murky hills.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AS EARLE HAD reported, the road was a slow one that seemed to go on for ever. After Lairg it became very narrow, a slender ribbon coiling through the wilderness. At distances of a hundred yards or more glimmered the white staves of passing places, and often they appeared in unexpected situations to which the road gave no indication that it would wind. But it always did. There was but the one road, climbing and turning across the mountains, the single, tenuous evidence of man in this empty, primeval landscape. We met few vehicles. We were often alone through many miles of wrack-laden country. When the mist parted we caught the sight of dark peaks and stretches of dreary moor and bogland. There were few trees, there were no animals, and we passed more lochs than houses. The rustle of the rain was brisk and continuous; the whole of Sutherland seemed to weep. Once I stopped to fill my pipe, and then the only sound was of rain. It battered the car and hissed on the road and rattled on the foliage of scrubby birches. It seemed to sum up the remoteness of a country that was proof against the usage of man; here he could fret a little at the edges but no more: he didn't belong. Even Verna was moved. 'Just think what it must be like to live here in the winter.'

'People don't live here. They stick to the coast. Here you can't even graze sheep.'

'But the coast is just as bad. It's the back of beyond, and the nights there are just as long. No wonder the natives are so queer. You can't expect civilized people up this way.'

'You are worrying about meeting Colin's people.'

Verna shivered. 'It won't be pleasant. George, I'm relying on you to stand by me. That old man Jamie scares me stiff.'

'He was fond of Colin.'

'Don't I know it!'

'You had better take the line that you're still grieving for him.'

'Well, it's the truth.' Her eyes upbraided me.

'If you let it show I think you'll get by.'

I drove on. Verna was quiet, but on her face was a thoughtful expression. I have no doubt she was thinking that it wouldn't be easy to play the heartbroken widow with Anne looking on. But then the expression grew complacent and I took it that she had settled her tactics. I had confidence in her. The role might be difficult, but Verna brought to it the poise of a genuine hypocrite.

At long last our tedious trail joined the equally tedious west-coast road, and after but few more rainy miles we reached the turn to Kyleness. The way thence began benevolently enough with a winding stretch through streaming birch woods. and not until a mile later did the going become truly dramatic. Then it was brutal but unforgettable. I know of no other road with which to compare it. The improbable gradients were quite lost sight of in its sheer tortuosity and scenic grandeur. Now we

had left the wilderness behind and had entered the lush landscape of the west coast. The road soared and dipped through an extravagant forest where wild roses bloomed and ferns grew thickly. Rocks were multicoloured and spectacular in form; torrents and waterfalls sheeted down them; we whirled past lochans where, unbelievably, waterlilies floated in peaceful colonies. It was a road of violence and luxury and not one hundred yards was straight. Vistas, coming and going like flashes of film, opened majestic views of a pale sea. Finally we crawled over a breakneck gradient between reddish rocks that rose in terraces, and found ourselves cruising along level road on heights above a sea loch, beyond which lay islands.

'Not much further,' Verna said, a little tensely. 'Kyleness is on the other side of the headland.'

'It's stopped raining.'

'I'd rather it began again. What we need is a bit of thunder.'

In fact there was a patch of fiery blue showing through the clouds above the islands; and as we drew closer I could see, like a vision, ghosted sunlight on a country further off still.

'What's that out there?'

'Lewis.'

I kept my eyes on it as I drove. We seemed suddenly to have entered a legendary land beyond the confines of an accountable world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WE CAME TO the hotel. It was a white-painted house standing alone near the point of the headland, with, descending from it, a steep path to a staithe and a boathouse on the loch shore below. A cluster of rowing boats were moored at the staithe. A sign at the top of the path said Private. A sign outside the hotel said House of Reay/Robert Mackenzie/Fishing. I stopped the Sceptre at the gate.

'Shall we check in first or carry on?'

'Don't be daft. We'll be staying at the house. If we booked in here they'd take it as an insult.'

I hesitated. 'I'm not family.'

'It makes no difference. You're a guest of the Mackenzies. That means you eat and sleep and drink with them. Especially the latter. So let's get it over.'

I was a little taken aback. It had not been my plan to become an inmate of the Mackenzie house. Certainly I wanted to hobnob with them but I would have liked to have preserved a comfortable distance. However, there seemed no help for it, so I set the Sceptre rolling again.

The road lifted gently to the point of the headland, which ended in a knob of pinkish rocks. On the right the land rose steeply in a heathery shoulder and on the left dropped sheer to the shores of the loch. We reached the bend: it was a strange moment. I felt an irresistible sensation of having been there before. Just as I had been imagining it from Earle's description, so now it was appearing in all its complex reality. I stopped for the second time.

'This won't take a moment. There's a point here I want to check.'

'But George, we're almost there—!' Verna's eyes grew round. 'This . . . this isn't the place where it happened, is it?'

I paid no attention. I suppose the scene of a killing is for me the most compulsive spot on earth. I climbed out of the car and stood quite still, intently absorbing every detail. The rocks had been the roadmaker's final problem; there had been no way round or over them. They had brought the road along the line of the loch till it reached the cliff, and then they had to blast. They had taken a great bite from the knob of the headland; the bend in the road was a descending hairpin; they had blasted it out to double width to prevent awkward encounters in the blind turn. On each side the pink rock was savagely shattered and on the inside of the bend it rose in a precipice. On the outside it was fissured vertically, forming pinnacles and broken teeth of rock. Now what Earle had asserted was evident. The gradient was steep going down into the bend. If the fight had taken place where I had parked the Sceptre it was unlikely to have shifted from there to the parapet. The distance was a matter of thirty yards, incorporating a surface of broken rock and debris: up there, without a doubt, Fortuny had been dragged while he was senseless or semi-conscious. I wondered if Sinclair had found trailing bloodstains. The rain had erased such

evidence for me.

I walked up to the parapet and looked over to the waves I could hear booming below. I disturbed a gull from its perch on a ledge and it went floating away with echoing cries. At this point the cliff was shallowly indented. In the angle lay a delta of fallen rocks. The sea, green and yeasty, broke over them furiously with a ponderous and sullen sound. One slab of rock stood clear of the breakers: I picked up a splinter and dropped it over. The splinter fell clean and, it seemed, slowly, till it bounced on the slab and soundlessly vanished. Fortuny hadn't bounced and hadn't vanished, though the odds were high that this would happen. The nature of the waves suggested a scour that would quickly have carried the body away.

'Oh God, George, do let's go!'

Verna had come up to stand beside me. She stared over the cliff with horrified eyes and in her voice was an urgent appeal. But I hadn't finished. There was one vital point that had to be settled before I left. I knew I must find the answer here and I thought I knew where I should look. I returned to the car. Ranked behind it were the splintered and broken pinnacles. Between several there was space sufficient for a man to insinuate his body. I compared the fractures and chose one. Beyond it I spied a cleft in the rock. Two steps took me through it: I was looking down at a bay with a quay, and a trawler moored to it. I looked back: I could see the Sceptre. I looked down: I could see the quay. I felt as sure as if he had told me that I was standing on the spot where the murderer had stood. From the quay a road departed in the direction of the village; and a path rose steeply to pass close under the rocks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WE DROVE OUT of that ominous ravine to be met at once by a prospect of the village. Kyleness was sited in a horseshoe of hills of which the two tips were two headlands. From the surrounding heights the land fell modestly to the shore and the quay, and the road descended by easy stages through the village before turning sharply towards the latter. White-walled croft cottages scattered the lower ground; houses of brick fronted the road; one boasted a shopfront, and beside it I noted the red flash of a phone box. The quay was furnished with a storage tank and several wooden structures, one of which I took to be a net store. Three poles carried a telephone line to it down the steep slope from the upper road. It was a scene of space and charm, and warmed now by chequered sunlight. In the bay lay a multitude of rocky islets and sheep were grazing on two of the largest. It lacked trees, I thought, but little else to render it a setting of the heart's desire; and I felt sad to have been brought to such a spot by the commission there of a brutal crime.

Verna wasn't sharing my sentiments. She pointed nervously: 'That's it.'

I would have guessed anyway; the Mackenzie house was easily the largest in Kyleness. It was a tall, grey, double-fronted building, standing alone on a forbidding slope, to the right of the road, directly above the quay, and presenting narrow windows to the sea and Lewis. Gates stood open to a short, steep drive which was flanked by azaleas in bloom, and grey walls surrounded the gardens to fence them off from the bracken and heather. The style of the house was mid-Victorian and indeed it had a formidable appearance.

'George, I'm relying on you,' Verna muttered. Her usual brio was quite cowed.

'He can but eat you,' I returned callously.

Her expression conveyed that that was no joke.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BUT IT WAS Alex who, seeing us pull up, hastened to open the heavily panelled door. He came out with a welcoming smile and embraced his mother and kissed her.

'This is splendid. We didn't expect you until later.' He turned to me and grasped my hand. 'What luck that Verna had you to call on.'

I thought he looked thinner than when I had last seen him and that his brown eyes met mine a little deliberately. But then Anne came running out of the house to throw her arms round Verna.

'Oh – mother!'

'My child!!'

'Oh mother, I've wanted you such a lot.'

'Now I'm here, my darling.'

'I'm so miserable.'

'Darling, we're going to make it all right.'

Anne sobbed and Verna comforted. It was the best thing that could have happened. I could see Verna's morale rising rapidly as she wept and commiserated with her daughter. I imagined that she had expected Anne to be censorious and that this scene yielded a double cordial. Her eyes sparkled: she could feel her situation becoming established. She was the long-awaited mother, come to comfort, support, and forgive.

'Then you've arrived, woman,' said a dry voice that halted Verna's cooing instantly. The tall figure of James Mackenzie loomed impressively in the doorway. He was eyeing Verna askew and his thin-lipped mouth had a joyless droop. His lean, high-cheekboned features were framed in long hair that now was quite white. Verna released Anne, but kept a firm grip on her arm.

'Yes, I'm here, Jamie,' she said meekly.

'Aye. And you've come too late to do more than greet along with the lassie.'

Verna bridled. 'I came as soon as I could.'

'Where were you when the lass was carrying?'

'I—' She shot a look at Anne. 'That is between my daughter and me.'

'Aye, no doubt.' The drooped mouth drooped further. 'It will be between you that you gave her no countenance. It will be between you that set on a scoundrel to come worrying her night and day. But woman, it's between you and me that I never had word that my son was dead, and that you did not come to speak to an old man and seek to lighten his grieving. Where was your heart then, and where is your heart now? You had a husband worth a dozen of the rogue you sent to woo your daughter.'

Verna's eyes were big, but she remembered. She gave a sob. 'Oh, that isn't fair! I loved Colin. No woman could have loved him more than I did. When he died it broke something inside me, I was out of my mind for days. I couldn't bring myself to write letters. I simply had to leave it to other people. They didn't write to you, but I never

knew that. Oh, you don't know how unfair you're being.'

James Mackenzie's eyes were fierce. 'But since, woman? In all this time that you've been back?'

'When I realized you hadn't been told I just didn't know what to do about it. You get so angry. I couldn't think what to write and I daren't come to see you. I knew what you'd think, that I didn't love Colin, and I couldn't bear to hear you accuse me of it.' She ventured another sob.

'Aye, and that's likely,' James Mackenzie growled. But now there was a curious expression in his eye: it might well have been unwilling admiration. 'You loved him so sore that you could not face me – could not abide a wee explanation. Your fondness unnerved you. Your grief was so strong that you could not fufil the mere forms of humanity.'

'I loved him. But you've never believed that.'

'Your love stopped short of doing what he would have wished.'

'You're so unfair!'

'You have not behaved well, woman.'

'It's because you're so hard. And yet you blame me.'

'Ach well, ach well.' The old man sighed. 'You cannot be other than you are, I'm thinking. Colin chose you, and that's in your favour, and you brought him a lad and a fair lassie.'

'I never loved anyone else but Colin.'

'I am hoping that truth is in your conscience. But we'll say no more. I cannot well blame you that his bones are lying so far from Kylie.'

Verna snuffled and hugged Anne's arm: Anne's eyes were large and distant. She too had changed in the last year; her handsome face had fined, had saddened. One felt that the roguish smile she had from Colin had been overlaid by much suffering; there was hurt in her face. She had a stillness about her as though a vital part had been stunned. James Mackenzie raised his hand and let it fall.

'You had best come in, then, and seek your room. It is a sad time to be offering welcome, but I doubt not that things will mend yet.' He peered at me. 'You'll be Colin's friend?'

I nodded. 'We've met before.'

'Aye, I recollect. He spoke much of you. They were happier days then.'

I held back. 'If you're short of room . . .'

James Mackenzie stared, then grabbed my hand. 'Ach, get in, and cease your nonsense.' He had the grasp of a man much younger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WE MET MRS Mackenzie, a busy, grey-haired matron in whom I remembered Colin's lively mother, and Iain Mackenzie's wife, Maisie, a tall, sandy-haired woman of about fifty. Then we were introduced to Anne's daughter, who was sleeping soundly in an old-fashioned cradle. She had been christened Helen, after her great-grandmother, and of her lineage there could be no doubt. The faces of babies differ widely. In some the features are determinedly neutral. They are baby faces, and time must elapse before they begin to assume their distinctive characters. In others the character is present from birth and they seem to enter the world as complete people. Such a one was Helen. She was instantly recognizable as a Mackenzie and as Anne's daughter. She had dark hair and a perfectly shaped nose and the chin and the mouth of her mother and her grandfather. The genes of Fortuny, Verna and Colin's mother might never have existed in this world: they had been side-stepped entirely. Helen had been born where she belonged. And for once, I think, I saw Verna lovable, when she looked with starry eyes at her granddaughter. In that there was no falseness. I felt that baby was going to be spoiled.

'Oh darling. When is the christening?'

Just the wraith of a smile came into Anne's eyes. 'Not yet, mother. Too much has happened. I don't feel ready for that just now.'

'We have not regular kirk services here,' beamed Mrs Mackenzie. 'The preacher fits us in with a wheen other parishes.'

'But couldn't we have the christening in Ullapool?'

'That is an overlong journey for a tender wee bairn.'

Verna looked unconvinced. I could see that she was planning such a christening as Ullapool would long remember, and in this I imagined, from the glint in his eye, that James Mackenzie was not far behind her. For a moment the tragedy was forgotten in considerations of pure bliss. But not by Anne.

'There won't be any christening. There won't be anything till Earle comes back.'

Verna's glee was checked. 'But, darling, we must make plans for the future.'

'There isn't any future. Can't you see that? There hasn't been any future since Wednesday.'

'My dear, life does go on.'

'No.' Anne shook her head decidedly. 'It stopped then. Up there on the cliff.'

'Ach, that was just foolishness,' James Mackenzie chided. 'No harm will come to your laddie. I ken Sinclair and he kens me. And here is Colin's friend come to make all right.'

'He can't make all right.'

'And who better? Is not he a famous man in London? I swear he will settle this matter as quick as a salmon jumps over a rock. And then your laddie will come home, and you will be bonnie as a briar rose. Ach, now, put your fears away. It is a

sad affair, but we have weathered the worst.'

Anne looked at me. Her eyes were piteous. 'Did they let you talk to Earle?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I had a long chat with him. I'm convinced that Earle is innocent.'

'You see?' James Mackenzie said quickly. 'The business is all in hand, lassie. The Superintendent would not be for committing himself unless he was sure as the Butt of Lewis.'

'I never thought he was guilty.'

'And who did? Have I not given you word and hand?'

She faltered. 'What did he say of me?'

'He told me he loved you,' I said. 'And to be sure to tell you.'

She turned away. James Mackenzie jigged his shoulders. 'It is true that the laddie is leal,' he said. 'I am not the worst judge of a man and I marked him as soon as he whistled in here. You picked a true heart, my harebell. He will always treat you kind and fair. You have taken a wrong step but he will not fret you with it – and why would he, when the bairn is as fair as your own?'

Anne dropped her head over the cradle. 'He'll forgive me for that,' she said.

'Then what will he not forgive you?'

'I betrayed him,' she sobbed, and ran from the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY

WE WERE SHOWN to our quarters by Mrs Mackenzie. My room had once been Colin's, she told me; it faced the sea and from its tall sash windows I had a view of the quay and the islands, and Lewis. Long since he had gazed at that ranging panorama of rock and sea and far-off land. It had perhaps been remembered in the dust and sun glare and the brutal sweat of Africa. A Scotsman dreams of home because there is no other home quite like Scotland, and I was sure that Colin, if he had lived, would have returned at last to that old grey house. He had been the younger son, the wanderer, the Scot who reaches for romantic horizons, like the distant mirage of the Hebrides that he had seen each morning and evening. But he had carried his Scotland with him: I had caught the light of it in his eyes; and his daughter, seeking help in her trouble, had found herself instantly at home in Kylie. She was Colin's, she was theirs: those who offended her offended the Mackenzies. I thought it only too likely that if Fortuny had tried pressure his position in Kylie would have become perilous. There might not have been a premeditated deed but there could well have been a reckless use of opportunity, and if that were so I feared Sinclair was right and that here was a case that would never come to court. I shook my head as I awaited the summons to the evening meal. Now the sun was clear of clouds and was splendidly declining towards the sea. It was flooding the scene with a reddish gold in which headlands and islands stood out hard and in which the floating mist of Lewis seemed to gain detail like that of a smudged map. Below lay the trawler and the deserted quay. Gulls were perched in a row on the bollards. Nothing moved except minuscule sheep on the larger islands in the bay, and the water below them was so greenly calm that I could see the island and them reflected in it. But then a gull scolded and took wing, to be followed reluctantly by others; two men had stepped ashore from the trawler and were beginning to climb the path to the road. I watched idly. One was tall; him I took to be Iain Mackenzie. The other was a fair-haired youngster, not much over twenty, dressed in a boiler suit and carrying a toolbox. They climbed slowly, talking to each other. The hands of each were black with grease. It was easy to detect from their relative demeanours that one was the skipper and one the man. When they reached the road they talked a little longer, or rather Iain talked and the youngster listened; then Iain clapped the latter on the shoulder and turned towards the house. In the meantime the gulls had returned to their bollards and from below I heard shortly the dull resonance of a gong.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

IAIN JOINED US at the supper table. He was a man cast in his father's mould, but he lacked a little of the fine presence that distinguished the older Mackenzie. He perhaps felt overshadowed by him. He was certainly quieter and had nothing to say after taking my hand. He wore his hair short, in contrast to his father's, and in consequence his face seemed craggier and bleaker. He was marked on the forehead with an old, blue scar, such as those carried by coal miners, and he had lost a joint from a finger of his left hand, no doubt in some mishap of his calling. He ate hungrily; when he caught my eye his own returned coolly to his plate; now and then James Mackenzie threw his son glances, and when the coffee came he addressed him.

'And are you ready for sea again, Iain?'

'Aye, about,' Iain Mackenzie replied.

'You have the gear fixed?'

'It is fixed. We had not time quite to finish the job.'

'But you'll be away?'

'We are off tomorrow. We have wasted enough of the moon, I'm thinking.'

'Aye, you have. But you cannot well go fishing when the boatie is out of trig.' He turned to me. 'They've had trouble, you ken – it was why they fetched in here on Wednesday. There was a cranky worm-gear in the steering. They had to send for one to Wick.'

'The trawler was unserviceable.' I made it a comment.

Iain Mackenzie took sugar. 'I would not say the boat was unseaworthy. But she was steering like a kye with staggers.'

'Iain just loves the boatie,' Mrs Mackenzie put in nervously. 'He'll be for showing you over it, Superintendent. It is as clean and shiny as a new penny. He cannot bear to have anything amiss.'

I poured myself cream. 'The fault developed suddenly?'

'It had been coming on,' Iain Mackenzie said. 'We had some rough weather at the back end of last week. I could feel the play in her after that.'

'You couldn't have got the job done in Ullapool?'

'Ach, we touched there to unload the catch. It was sending to Wick in any case. It was a job I could well do myself.'

'Iain kens machinery,' Mrs Mackenzie supplied. 'He is a sore trial to Maisie.'

'Ach, his dirty clothes!' chimed in the latter. 'Would you believe a man could make himself so black?'

I was silent; I felt I could not decently press the subject further. But in my own mind I was now convinced that the trawler's appearance had not been coincidental. No doubt the job had been waiting to be done but it did not sound of pressing urgency: a sloppy worm-gear may be an annoyance but it is unlikely to lead to an emergency. Perhaps the same thoughts were occurring to Iain. He resumed the

subject without prompting.

'You ken that handling is a nice matter in trawling. I am not the one to put up with slack steering.'

'Aye, and he's right,' James Mackenzie said. 'It was myself who advised him to come in. Iain gave me a ring on the Monday and he mentioned the steering then. He was not due back until the weekend, but he took my counsel and changed his plans.'

I nodded. 'When did you arrive?'

Iain Mackenzie took his time. 'We tied up below at half three. You will find the time written in the log.'

'At 2.30 p.m.'

'Just that.'

'It was later when you came up to the house.'

'Aye, well. There were things to be done. I could not rest till I had stripped the gear out.'

'But the crew, they would have left?'

James Mackenzie chuckled. 'You kenna crew bodies,' he said. 'They would be away up to Robbie's bar to wash the salt out of their throats.'

'To the hotel.'

'And where else. There is but one bar in Kylie.'

'They were soon away,' Iain Mackenzie said. 'They had their cars parked at the quay.'

'But your engineer. Wouldn't he have stayed to help you?'

Iain Mackenzie drank deliberately. 'We do not run to an engineer,' he said. 'The *Kylie Rose* is not a liner.'

'I saw you leave her with a lad who was carrying a toolkit.'

He stared for a moment and then nodded. 'Aye. He's a laddie who lends me a hand. He's a good mechanic, but he's not an engineer.'

'He didn't stay to help you on Wednesday?'

Iain shook his head. 'He went off with the rest. We are not tied up in Kylie so often that you can keep the laddies hanging about.'

'Then you stayed alone.'

'Aye. And you will find as much in my statement. I do not know what Sinclair told you, but it has all been gone over a dozen times.'

He pushed his cup aside and began to fill a bulldog pipe. He was such a dour and unexpressive man that I was unable to decide whether I had offended him. I had put my questions and he had answered them, without haste but without evasion. It was only his last reply that contained a hint that I should have done. I glanced round the dining table. Verna, at the other end, was engrossed in a low conversation with Anne. Mrs Mackenzie was pouring more coffee and Maisie Mackenzie was assembling dinner plates. I met Alex's eye. I thought it was amused. He had contributed nothing to any of the exchanges. Seeing his uncle pat his pockets in search of matches, he quietly produced a box and passed it across.

'Aye well, aye well,' Iain Mackenzie said, puffing smoke in my direction. 'You will need more talk than this, I'm thinking, if you are to get Anne's laddie off. Did you see him at Dornoch?'

'I saw him,' I said.

'Was he well in his spirits?'

'He was rather low.'

Iain nodded. ‘And who would not be, sitting there in a cell in such a predicament. Do you fancy his chances?’

‘I think he is innocent.’

‘Ach, but is that the same thing?’

‘I believe it will be necessary to produce the culprit before we can expect Earle to be released.’

Iain puffed with unchanged expression. ‘What are the chances of that, do you think?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I shrugged. ‘It will probably depend on the help I get here.’

‘You have no idea, then, who you are seeking.’

‘I’m looking for a man who was no friend of Fortuny’s.’

‘That’s just certain. But he was a chiel who had no friends at all in Kylie.’

‘Then a man whom he had deeply offended.’

Iain considered the point leisurely. ‘From what I hear tell there were plenty of those. The laddie had more illwishers than a herring has bones.’

‘Aye, that’s the truth,’ James Mackenzie said heartily. ‘We have been hearing that tale from Alex. He kent Fortuny and his misbehavings. You will need to come in more canny than that.’

‘I’ll be seeking a man who had opportunity.’

‘Aye,’ Iain Mackenzie said. ‘But that will let in the one half of Kylie, and just anyone passing through at the time.’

‘I said I would need help.’

He puffed imperturbably. ‘You did not get anything useful from Sambrooke.’

‘We talked.’

‘I’m thinking you did. But could he not put you on to something more definite?’

I said nothing.

‘It’s just this,’ Iain continued. ‘We have been putting our heads together, too. And the way it is we cannot well see how you will ever come up with the man you are seeking. There was not a witness that we have heard tell of – and they would speak to us that would not to Sinclair – and the plain fact is that nobody in Kylie would give information, even if they had it. So it rests with what you can get out of Sambrooke, which I’m thinking will not be enough for your purpose. You will need to go about it a different way than putting some other laddie in his place.’

‘It may be that Sambrooke does have information.’

Iain regarded me at length. ‘Touching one man?’

‘He was able to recall in great detail all the events of last Wednesday.’

‘You will not be naming him?’

I made my face blank. ‘I’m here to further my inquiries. Then I shall talk to Earle again. At this stage I’m merely verifying facts.’

There was a short silence. The old man broke it.

‘Ach, you do well to box clever, Superintendent. And for all that Iain has told you there will be help enough to get Anne’s laddie out of clink. Just ask for it, man. I will put out word that you are to be given every assistance. And now, if you will, we’ll into the parlour, and assist our digestion with a dram.’

He rose, and the rest of the family obediently rose with him. Mrs Mackenzie politely indicated to Verna that she should lead the way. Verna did. Anne followed her. Mrs Mackenzie and Maisie followed Anne. Then came James Mackenzie and myself, with Alex and Iain on the tail. The room we left was large and half-panelled

and had windows that overlooked the braes. In its open hearth a fire had been lit to take the edge off the evening chill. The fire smouldered without flame, and it pervaded the room with a brackeny odour. Peat. It was the first time I had ever sat by a peat fire.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I TOOK MY dram – a liquor of some body – but then excused myself from the company. Robertson was waiting at the hotel and I intended to waste no time in comparing notes with him. The evening chill was no myth, so I fetched an anorak from my room; I set out briskly up the narrow road in the soft gloom of the northern twilight.

The village seemed deserted and nothing stirred at the quay below. Looking back, I could see a few lighted windows and trails of pale smoke from a scatter of chimneys. Out to sea, lying low over Lewis, stretched a line of ochreish cloud, but the rest of the sky was clear and pointed by stars of frosty brilliance. I paused at the bend. In truth it had an aspect of evil omen. The situation, the seclusion, the brutality of the rocks, they formed a setting in which violence seemed implicit. There is something of the sort in all mountain passes: perhaps many have been the scene of treachery and murder: I have always had a feeling in Glencoe that had no massacre occurred there then a massacre would still be to come: and I sensed this now in the ravine at Kyleness: it had had tragedy in it, waiting to happen. The roadmakers, in blasting through these rocks, had uncovered a killing-ground. I paused long enough to light my pipe, a little gesture of defiance, before I hastened from the spot: which, among other things, was a frost trap.

At the hotel I was hoping to find some life, but there I was disappointed. Only two cars were parked on the granite-chip apron and one of those was a police Imp. I was met in the hall by Robert Mackenzie. He had presumably been advised of my approach. He had two filled glasses waiting on a tray and he came forward beaming, his hand extended.

'It is a cool evening, Supintendent. I thought you would have driven up from Jamie's.'

'Robert Mackenzie?'

'Just call me Robbie. And do me the kindness of clinking a glass.'

I did him the kindness. He was a portly man with a broad, fresh-complexioned face. He was about fifty, and had an ingratiating manner and a strong, moist grasp.

'And will the laddie be getting off, Superintendent – do you say there's a good chance of it?'

I sipped. 'There's a fair chance. If people will tell me what they know.'

'Ach, you can depend on that. We are all for helping Colin's lassie. And though I have not met the lad myself, I am told he is a fine young man.'

'I take it that was not your opinion of Fortuny.'

Robert Mackenzie wriggled his plump shoulders. 'Now he was my guest, you ken that, and I never speak evil of a guest.'

'Was it you that called him to the phone on Wednesday?'

'Aye, but what harm was I to see in that? It was just Jamie wishing to speak with

him. Who kent it would turn out the way it did?'

I shrugged. I had other questions to put, but I thought that I would talk to Robertson first. I nodded towards the bar, which we could see empty and unlit.

'Where's your custom tonight?'

Robert Mackenzie sighed. 'It is a wee early for the fishing. But I have some bookings for the weekend.'

'Don't you have regulars from the village?'

'Aye, but this sad affair has affected business.' He gave me a sly look. 'You would not think it, but folks are not comfortable with a policeman in the house.'

'What have they to fear from him?'

'Ach, just nothing! It is simply the way of folks in Kylie. And yon Robertson has had them here putting down their statements – it has made them uneasy about the place.' He drank up rather abruptly. 'You'll be for having a chat with Robertson, then.'

'If you'll tell him that I'm here.'

'Just step this way, man. You will find him waiting on you in the lounge.'

Sergeant Robertson was a youngish officer. He sat writing in a notebook when we entered. Robert Mackenzie introduced us rather officiously, then retired, closing the door softly. I shook Robertson's hand. He had worried hazel eyes and a serious, porridgy face. He had been sitting by the hearth, where another peat fire smouldered, and I took the chair opposite his.

'Inspector Sinclair has briefed you about me?'

'Yes, sir. He rang this afternoon.'

'Has there been any progress since then?'

'No, sir. I cannot exactly say there has.'

'I've talked to Iain Mackenzie.'

'Yes, sir.'

At once I could feel I had Robertson's interest.

'He tells me that he was alone on the trawler when Fortuny was killed.'

'Yes, sir.'

'What do the crew have to say about that?'

Robertson frowned anxiously (I found that this was a habit of his). 'There is no discrepancy on that point in the statements of the nine crew members, and Robert Mackenzie, his wife and his daughter.'

'Do you think there has been collusion?'

'I cannot well say. But there is a wonderful degree of unanimity. If I had to venture an opinion, sir, it would be that they are telling the truth.'

'Are the statements here?'

'No, sir. They have all gone back to Dornoch.'

That was a pity. I drew on my dead pipe. 'Just run through what they say happened.'

Robertson hitched forward to the edge of his chair. 'They tied up at the quay at two-thirty p.m. They had two cars there, one belonging to James Fairlie and one to Andrew Mackenzie, who is the mate. Iain Mackenzie dismissed them and they drove up here in the cars, five in Andrew Mackenzie's Hillman Minx and four in James Fairlie's Ford Cortina. They arrived here at about two-forty p.m., which is vouched for by Robert Mackenzie, his wife and his daughter.'

'The nine of them.'

‘Yes, sir.’ Robertson ticked them off on his fingers. ‘Andrew Mackenzie, Stephen Mackenzie, Hamish Mackenzie, Alistair Mackenzie, James Fairlie, James Collins, Angus Mackay, Robert Mackay and Walter Ferguson. That is the whole crew as it is shown in the papers of the *Kylie Rose*.’

‘Every man jack of them arrived here.’

‘Yes, sir. The nine of them went into the bar. Each one of them is known to Robert Mackenzie, his wife and his daughter, who were all present.’

‘Setting up the drinks.’

‘You can depend on it, sir.’

‘With some contravention of the licensing laws.’

Robertson looked startled. ‘I would not just say that, sir, in consideration of the crew bodies being cousins or connected. A publican may entertain his kinsfolk whatever the time of day, and if Iain Mackenzie were to pay scot afterwards, the law can have little to say to that.’

‘So drink they did.’

‘Aye, they did. And they were not ever off the premises. They were not as much as out of the bar, except for a small journey up the hall.’

I struck a light for the dead pipe. Robertson watched with his worried frown. I had the feeling that my hint at an infraction of the licensing laws had given him greater alarm than would have any aspersion of his conduct of the case.

‘Do any of these fellows have a record?’

He hitched a little. ‘Not precisely that, sir.’

‘Pub brawls. Violence. Threatening behaviour.’

‘Ach, well. They have appeared now and then on such-like charges.’

‘Some involving knives?’

‘Not involving knives. They are mostly a decent set of laddies. No doubt on pay day they will be for drinking, but you cannot altogether blame them for that.’

‘But they do carry knives.’

‘It may be so, sir.’

‘Were they searched?’

He squirmed uncomfortably. ‘They would surely have got rid of any weapons they were carrying. And we did have our hands on a red-hot suspect.’

I let it go with a nod. In the first moments on the clifftop little attention would have been directed to the fishermen. What had stood out was the belligerent stranger and his apparent involvement with the stranger who was dead. And yet, among those on the rope, or standing by with the other spectators, might have been a man beneath whose jacket nestled damning evidence: an empty sheath.

‘When did Iain Mackenzie show up?’

‘Iain Mackenzie rang from the quay, sir. But first he made a call to us. The message was timed at 16.35 hours.’

‘Then he rang the hotel.’

‘He rang Robert Mackenzie. He asked him to send the men down to the quay. He said there had been an accident at the bend and that a body was lying below on the rocks.’

‘He spoke of an accident.’

‘Yes, sir. We have it in Robert Mackenzie’s statement. It was also the word he used to us. In his own statement he could not recall his precise words.’

‘The men turned out.’

‘They drove down in the cars. They found Iain Mackenzie getting the gear out. They loaded it on the cars and drove back up again. He left Andrew Mackenzie to recover the body.’

‘While he went to his house.’

‘That is so, sir.’

‘Who first decided that it was no accident?’

Robertson went into a frown. ‘I cannot exactly say, sir. There was no talk of accidents when the patrol car got there.’

I puffed. ‘And the men – all nine turned out?’

‘We have it so in their statements.’

‘Nobody thought to check that at the time.’

Robertson looked glum. ‘No, sir.’

I studied his anxious, smooth-cheeked face with its small, slightly staring eyes. He had, I was sure, spent a day of frustration getting statements that offered no hint of progress. If the Mackenzies had something to hide it was beyond the skill of Robertson to uncover it: which didn’t mean that he was entirely insensible to the way the wind was blowing.

‘So what is your thinking about the case?’

He gave me the startled look again. ‘I cannot be sure, sir. There are very strong grounds for bringing a charge against Sambrooke.’

‘You think he is guilty.’

‘I did not say so, sir. I was favourably impressed by the young man. But we have no evidence at all that any other person was up at the rocks at that time.’

‘You think we should trust the statements of the crew.’

‘I have been unable to find a discrepancy.’

‘And the statement of Iain Mackenzie?’

Robertson paused for a cautious moment. ‘There is this about Iain Mackenzie, sir. He was certainly alone when the crime took place. We have to accept his unsupported word for his movements and the finding of the body.’ He paused again. ‘It is not beyond imagining that he could have supplied us with a witness. In a place like Kylie they would think no harm of supporting such a man to the police.’

I nodded sagely. ‘Why do you think he didn’t?’

‘I have been giving the matter some thought. I believe he did not because he was thinking that his unsupported word was safest. We might question it but we could not disprove it, while we might lay traps for a false witness. It was cannier to let it be as it stood, with the crew telling nothing but the truth.’

I let go a couple of puffs. ‘And you are saying further that these are not the calculations of an innocent man.’

His shoulders moved. ‘It was a little strange that he should find the body so promptly. You cannot see into the neuk from the path, you must stray aside almost to the edge. Unless you chanced to know there was something to be looked for, I cannot well see why you should do that.’

‘Are you suggesting that he witnessed the crime?’

‘This is just opinionating, sir. But it would not be strange, to my way of thinking, if he was nearer to the spot than his own wheelhouse. And if you are where you can see the rocks then you are where you can see the parapet, and if you saw Fortuny being whirled over you could not help seeing who was whirling him.’

‘He may have been nearer yet.’

Robertson frowned. ‘I would not wish to go as far as that. I am thinking that Iain Mackenzie has more to tell us, but that is all the facts warrant. And if he kens, and will not speak, it cannot be in Sambrooke’s favour. Though it is a fact that Iain Mackenzie would give up no man that dwells in Kylie.’

I paused. ‘And this is Sinclair’s opinion?’

‘I ken nothing of the inspector’s notions,’ Robertson said hastily.

‘He gave me a distinct impression that he suspected the Mackenzies of being involved.’

‘Aye, well, he may be thinking so.’ Robertson’s blubbery lips quivered. ‘But there is just no evidence of the kind that has come to light, sir, and all I have said is my own opinion.’

I grinned to myself: I could well imagine that Sinclair was not an easy boss to work for. But I thought that I might acquit him of having primed Robertson to foster my suspicion of Iain Mackenzie. Robertson had suspicions enough of his own and they probably went further than he cared to admit. He was alone in Mackenzie country: it was worth his considering how far he should trust me. I made the grin visible.

‘You have no more to tell me.’

Robertson looked relieved. ‘It is all I have, sir.’

I knocked out my pipe in the peat fire. Now I wanted a word with Robert Mackenzie.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I FOUND HIM in the hall, as earlier, and at no great distance from the door of the lounge. He sidled forward with a knowing smile and nodded towards the room I had just left.

'Is he still setting down his notes, or have you given him something fresh to glower about?'

I made my face a blank. 'I would like to talk to you and your family.'

'Aye, you're welcome – come into the private – I would not have you leave without a crack. Ailsie is for inviting you to a bite of something, and Beattie is wild to see a Scotland Yard detective.'

He led me to the top of the hall and pushed open a baize-lined door; we entered a large, well-furnished parlour with windows that overlooked the loch. A handsome, bold-eyed woman rose to greet me, and a girl who flushed when she met my eye. I felt a degree of constraint in their manner that I could not at once account for.

'Meet the superintendent, my dear – Cousin Colin's great friend down in London, you ken. Superintendent, this is Ailsie, my wife – and the blushing lass is my daughter, Beattie.'

I shook hands. Ailsie Mackenzie's grip was firm but her smile was brittle. Beattie Mackenzie had a fluttery handshake which she terminated awkwardly, with a nervous simper. Robert Mackenzie bustled about the room.

'Sit you down, Superintendent – sit you down. We do not often have the honour of such a man in our own parlour. Jamie tells me that you are a great expert who is certain to get the young man off. That is the heart's wish of all present, and I can think of no better reason for a dram.'

He went to a cabinet in a recess by the hearth and set up four generous glasses. His wife, meanwhile, had smiled herself out, to return with a tray ready-loaded with snacks. I accepted some cheese and oatcake. Robert Mackenzie handed the drinks. There followed a curious, uneasy silence while we nibbled and sipped a little. Then Robert Mackenzie led off.

'Aye – aye – it is a sorry business. You have seen what it has done to our trade, Superintendent. The sooner it is cleared up the better for everyone.'

'And that is the truth,' Ailsie Mackenzie ventured. 'It has upset everyone here in Kylie. This is a decent and quiet sort of place, Superintendent. We are not used to such wild goings-on.'

Beattie Mackenzie said nothing at all: she sat twirling her glass and avoiding my eye.

I put my first question. 'When did Fortuny arrive?'

'Ach, it was Sunday teatime,' Robert Mackenzie replied eagerly. 'He drove up here when I was down at the moorings and requested a room for a few days.'

'I booked him in,' Ailsie Mackenzie said. 'Though had I known his business I

would have seen him further. But he was a smooth, well-favoured man, and I kent no harm in giving him a room.'

'He made a favourable impression.'

'I would not say that. But he had a polite, go-easy way with him. I put him down for a professional man, though I could not say exactly what.'

I turned to Beattie Mackenzie. 'What did you think of him?'

She coloured and stared at me helplessly.

'Ach, you may as well know,' Robert Mackenzie said quickly. 'He just about turned Beattie's head completely.'

'That is not true, father!'

'Did he not make a pass at you – aye, and between pushing his luck with Miss Anne?'

'Anne wasn't going to have him.'

'And what does that prove, but that she has twice the sense that you have?'

Beattie Mackenzie snatched her head angrily. The glass was trembling in her hands. She had dark hair with ringlets and pretty, rounded features and also, I imagined, a passionate temper. But she was silent.

'Aye – well.' Her father shrugged and tipped his glass. 'I kenna what you know of Fortuny, Superintendent, but he was a fast worker with the lasses. Had he been here longer you might well have suspected one of our laddies for the job. But he was just a stranger, you ken, and Beattie has no young man to take offence.'

'Your daughter has no admirers?'

'Well – not just that! But you ken how it is with the young lasses. They're for having a fling with one or another, and she has not been going steady yet.'

Beattie Mackenzie slammed down her glass. 'I'm for watching the bar,' she said.

'Beattie!' her mother exclaimed warningly.

'Ach, let her go,' Robert Mackenzie said.

Beattie jumped up and flounced from the room. Her face was flaming and her eyes averted. Her mother sent me an anxious look. Robert Mackenzie took another nip.

'She is upset, no doubt,' he said evenly. 'She had more than a fancy for that fellow. And why should she not? He was a cut above the fisher-laddies who come teasing her in the bar.'

'My father was a fisher-laddie,' Ailsie Mackenzie said sharply.

'And was not mine too?' Robert Mackenzie replied. 'All I am saying is that Fortuny was a smooth and fair-spoken man. You cannot say less.'

Ailsie Mackenzie looked as though she might, but instead she picked a shortcake from the tray. She munched with vigour. Her husband stared in his glass and gently agitated its contents.

'How did Fortuny spend his time?' I asked.

Robert Mackenzie scowled. 'He spent his time visiting. But when he had outstayed his welcome at Jamie's he would go for a ramble or take a boat out.'

'But you saw plenty of him.'

'He took his meals here.'

'Did he bring any friends with him?'

'He did not.'

'Then his acquaintance would be limited to James Mackenzie's household and yourself, your wife and your daughter.'

Robert Mackenzie hesitated. 'Aye.'

‘Did any of you accompany him on his rambles?’

‘Is it likely?’ Ailsie Mackenzie demanded indignantly. ‘Have we not work enough with running the hotel?’

‘But your daughter?’

‘Who kens?’ Robert Mackenzie said. ‘She lends a hand when it suits her convenience. But he would not want to be seen out with her, now would he, and him pressing Miss Anne to name the day.’

‘Where was she on Wednesday afternoon?’

‘She was helping her mother serve in the bar.’

‘After the boat docked.’

‘Aye. There was plenty to do then.’

I tried to get his eye. ‘Were you serving in the bar?’

‘Ach, no. But I was out and in. For a start I was down below, in the cellar, connecting the pump to a fresh keg.’

‘Where was Fortuny?’

‘He was in the lounge. We served him coffee there after lunch.’

‘He remained there from lunch until you called him to the phone?’

‘Aye. He did not budge from the lounge.’

I paused to select a slice of buttered bannock from the tray. ‘What makes you so sure that he stayed in the lounge?’

From the corner of my eye I could see him stir. ‘Well, you ken I was in there to collect his empties.’

‘That wouldn’t take long.’

Again a movement. ‘He rang for a drink when the lads came in.’

‘But then he was alone until you called him to the phone.’

‘Aye, well. But he would not have budged.’

I ate some of the bannock. ‘I think you had a word with him.’

Robert Mackenzie sat still. I looked at Ailsie Mackenzie. Her mouth was drawn tight and her eyes were fixed on her husband.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘I’ve only just met your daughter, but I can see she’s a girl with a will of her own. Fortuny was a womanizer. He could have wrapped her round his finger, and if he did then she would probably have defied you. So what would you do? You would have it out with Fortuny. You would tell him to get the hell out of your hotel. In fact, you knew he was in the lounge until the phone call because you were having a row with him which the call interrupted.’ I glanced back at Ailsie Mackensie. ‘Isn’t that true?’

‘Ach!’ she jerked her face away from me.

Robert Mackenzie stared at the hearth and the grey tendrils of the peat smoke. ‘And if that were true?’

‘What did he reply to you?’

Robert Mackenzie didn’t answer.

‘Wasn’t it to this effect: that if you threw him out he would take your daughter along with him?’

I heard Ailsie Mackenzie gasp.

‘I don’t think he gave a damn for your daughter,’ I said. ‘He was after Anne. She meant money to him. He was probably convinced that he would get his own way. But he couldn’t keep his hands off a pretty girl, and when you threatened to throw him out she made a handy lever. So suddenly that was the situation. She wouldn’t hold

back, and you couldn't get rid of him. And then the call came from James Mackenzie, who I am sure advised you what was afoot.'

'Ach, he's the very devil!' Ailsie Mackenzie exclaimed.

'What exactly were your movements after the phone call?'

'He came to the bar!' Ailsie Mackenzie cried. 'He came to tell me what was going on.'

'Ailsie, hold your tongue,' Robert Mackenzie growled. 'Do you not see that he's trying it on? He would talk you into the county jail if you let him, and you're for giving him a helping hand.' He finished his drink with a quick, irritable motion and set the glass on the tray with a slam. 'So that's the drift of it,' he said. 'You'll be setting me up to take the heat off the youngster.'

'I am simply trying to get at the facts.'

'Would you say it is a fact that I am a liar?'

I shrugged.

'I am looking you in the eyes and swearing that I took no part in what happened.'

'Then where were you?'

'Here – right here! In this very room where we sit now. And wishing that Anne's laddie would break every bone of him, which I had been sorely tempted to do myself.'

'You were here alone?'

'Ach – ach!'

'He was in here when Iain rang!' Ailsie Mackenzie burst out. 'And would he not be seen leaving the bar, which faces the front and the gate?'

'He was not seen?'

'No, he was not!'

'Then you were in the bar, not in the parlour?'

'I was serving the laddies, and what else – and I could see that nobody left the house!'

I nodded, and ate up my bannock. 'So your husband was in here when Iain Mackenzie rang.'

'Aye – I've told you! I took the call and fetched Robert out to talk to him.'

'It must have been a moment of some excitement.'

Ailsie Mackenzie gazed. 'Who is going to deny it?'

'Did you go down to the clifftop?'

'Ach, we all did!'

'Your daughter too?'

'She went with the rest.'

'But your husband stayed here.'

Her mouth gaped. Robert Mackenzie looked grim.

'It's simple,' I said. 'Your husband mentioned earlier that he hadn't met Sambrooke. Sambrooke was present at the clifftop. It follows that your husband didn't go there.' I regarded him mildly. 'Yet surely what was happening was of considerable interest to you? If Fortuny was indeed dead it solved the problem that had just arisen.'

Robert Mackenzie stared at me bitterly. 'You are a master man all right,' he said. 'You forget nothing when once it is told you, and you throw it up at an unco moment. Aye, I did not go, and you'll ken why. And it was not that I was fresh back from murdering him. It was because the news of it went to my stomach and I was casting

my dinner like a sick bairn. You are right – dooms right – it had solved a problem, and it had answered the curse that I threw after him. I should not have done it, but I did, and when the news came my stomach threw up.'

I looked at him curiously. 'You believe in curses?'

'Aye. And who has a better right?'

'But you're a reasonable man.'

'Ach, and because of it I am compelled to believe.'

'His grandmother was Elspeth Mackay,' Ailsie Mackenzie broke in. 'She was kenned through the country for second sight. She let on the Viking curse to Robbie, and he was fool enough to cast it at Fortuny.'

'But . . . you believe it caused his death?'

'Aye.'

'Just the repetition of some words?'

'It works, it works,' Robert Mackenzie exclaimed. 'What use is it turning a blind eye to fact? At first I was scornful as a southron, I used the curse in a manner of jest – but it kept coming true, it never did fail, and in the end I was feared but to think of the words.'

'Could it not have been coincidence?'

'Ach, call it what you will. But it is a coincidence that always happens. And if I had kent what would befall Fortuny I would have bitten my tongue through before I uttered it.'

'What are the words?'

'You'll not get them from me. I will never speak nor think them again.'

'I ken the words,' Ailsie Mackenzie said, 'and I would not give them to a saint upon earth.'

I was intrigued. I had heard that second sight was a widely held belief in the islands, and I could well credit that a complementary belief in the efficacy of cursing might go with it. Robert Mackenzie seemed a rational enough man but the most sceptical among us have our blind spots. It was credible that in this instance he had reacted as he did. He was watching me closely.

'Then you must take some of the responsibility for Fortuny's death.'

He relaxed slightly. 'I am glad to do so. I have felt it on my conscience.'

'But for you, you are saying, it would not have happened.'

'I do not believe the young man would have died.'

'So that in fact the murderer is not wholly culpable.'

He stared for a moment, then averted his eyes. 'You ken how I'm placed. I'm wishing well. I am all for Miss Anne's young man getting off. But just supposing I knew more than I do, I am a sharer in the guilt, and I could not be informing. So though I would help you in any fair question, you will not be expecting me to go beyond that.'

'I think you are telling me you know who killed Fortuny.'

I heard his wife gasp. Robert Mackenzie shook his head. 'I was here in this place. I do not have second sight like my grandmother.'

'But you have spoken to that man since.'

'You are putting words in his mouth!' Ailsie Mackenzie cried. 'We have told you what we know. It is in the statements. You cannot come asking questions like Inspector Sinclair.'

'Whist, Ailsie, whist,' Robert Mackenzie chided. 'The man has a right to shog us

a little. His friend is sitting in Dornoch jail and there is no doubt that he should not be there.' He rose slowly and stood before me. 'I think we have finished our crack, Superintendent. You are going away with more in your head than I expected to put there when you stepped in. But remember this. If you did ken all, you might not be rushing off to Sinclair. This is a sad affair and a strange one, but it may not be just that simple.'

I rose too. 'I'll bear it in mind.'

'Aye. You may find it to be of service.'

'And let me thank you for your hospitality.'

'Ach, ach. You're in Kylie here.'

He saw me out; as we passed through the hall, I thought I heard Beattie's voice above. But Robert Mackenzie opened the door clumsily and noisily, and then there was only silence.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

IT WAS STILL not properly dark when I took my leave from the House of Reay. The loch, glimmering below, made hard silhouettes of the staithe and the moored boats. Ahead the great mass of rock that the road divided loomed dim and heavy, lacking in detail; and beyond it, in a dusky sea, a far-off lighthouse flashed indistinctly. I felt I was sure of one thing. Except for myself, the whole of Kyleness knew who had killed Fortuny. Robert Mackenzie and his family knew it and so did James and Iain and all their connections. This was what Sinclair must have sensed and why he had held his hand in charging Earle. It may have been that the Mackenzies had indulged his suspicions even as now they were indulging mine; they knew, and they felt sufficiently secure to be able to take this line in Earle's defence. Nobody would talk; the story was watertight; I could ask where I pleased but I would find no leaks in it. Sinclair was aware of this, and all he had asked me for was modest support for a case of not proven. My role, in fact, had been tacitly defined; I was to frank the situation with my professional repute; Earle would be freed, Sinclair would be justified, and the Mackenzies left unoffended and in possession of their secret. Fortuny, after all, was only a southron; he was not worth turning the world upside down over. Well, good enough. But my professional repute would not rest easy in these circumstances. It had a will of its own, and a curiosity, and a propensity to take offence that rivalled the Mackenzies. If it could not arrive at proof at least it demanded satisfaction, and as I walked down from the House of Reay I determined that I would penetrate the mystery before I quit Kyleness. That was the price of my professional repute and I would not accept a penny less. Yet a solution didn't seem to be getting closer. I had been struck by a contention of Robert Mackenzie's. Fortuny had not been in Kyleness long enough to have aroused any mortal enmity. He appeared to have met but very few people. The *Kylie Rose* and her crew had been at sea. He had aroused the anger of James Mackenzie and presented Robert Mackenzie with a problem, but could either of these have simmered to a point where murdering Fortuny entered the reckoning? I found it hard to believe. The sort of thrashing Earle gave him would have been adequate in either instance. It would have settled his hash with regard to Anne, and if he had persisted with Beattie I could easily imagine Robert Mackenzie repeating the dose. The auld way: it was sufficient; it was the natural recourse of the Mackenzies; it did not lead to stabbing a defenceless man and tossing his unconscious body to destruction. Fortuny's killer had not been angry, he had been possessed. He had been goaded by a maturity of injury and resentment. Yet who, except Earle had these qualifications, and what other stranger would the Mackenzies protect?

With my meditation at this stage I reached the passage through the rocks. There indeed it was dark; and the darkness seemed to accentuate the detonations of the surf below. I quickened my step. I couldn't quite subdue the feeling of horror with which

the place oppressed me. Yet I knew it was folly; though a man had been slain there, these remained just rocks, and this just a road. I came down from the cliff edge into the bend, where I could barely make out the road in front of me, and I failed to see the man who was standing there until I was almost upon him. The man was Alex.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

'I'M SORRY IF I startled you.'

He was standing on the verge exactly at the spot where Earle claimed he had waited. His face was merely a pale blur but I could imagine his amused smile. I grunted surlily.

'What are you doing here?'

He laughed. 'I came to indulge in the frissons. One doesn't often have such an opportunity. And I'm still young enough to admire Shelley.'

'You mean you were ghost-hunting?'

'I thought I'd give one a chance. I dare say that if Fortuny could appear he would jump at it. And I was his enemy in life, so who would be a better subject for haunting?'

I didn't at once reply. There seemed something almost predestined about Alex's appearance in this place, and I realized that, in my reverie, I had been just about to find him a niche. I had been sketching the killer's qualifications. They were qualifications shared by Alex. Small wonder if I had started when I found him close to me just then.

'Were you waiting for me?'

He laughed again. 'One expects you to look for the prosaic reason. But you're right, the frissons were just a bonus. I thought it was time we had a little talk.'

'What have you to tell me?'

'Not very much. But I appreciate that you may have questions to ask me.'

'Suppose we go somewhere a little less chilling.'

He shook his head. 'We can't talk in the house.'

He shivered; he was wearing a short coat and his hands were stuffed into the pockets. I wondered how long he had been waiting there and why he had not come up to the hotel. But I wasn't going to stay in that icy frost-trap. I gestured with my head and began to retrace my steps. Alex followed. We came to the parapet. He hesitated briefly, then sat down on the wall.

'This will do.'

I sat down near him. It was not a perch I would have chosen. One hundred and fifty feet below us the waves gnawed at the rocks where Fortuny had lain. But here in the better light I could just make out the features of the oval face turned towards me, and the large, dark eyes that stared unwinkingly into mine.

'Do you think I set Earle up for this?'

I paused before nodding abruptly. I thought I saw his mouth twist.

'You're right. It was too good a chance to miss. I knew that Earle could give him a beating. He had wiped the floor with him before. I would like to have done the job myself, but frankly I'm no good in a punch-up.'

'Are you satisfied with the result?'

His black eyes considered me. ‘The truth is yes. I can be as hypocritical as other people, but not on Fortuny’s account.’

‘You are glad he is dead.’

‘I’m glad.’

‘You must have felt he had done you grave injury.’

‘He stole my work. He jeopardized my career. And now he’s dead, and I’m glad.’

‘You don’t find it in your heart to pity him.’

Alex gave a jerk of his head. ‘It would be easy to say so. After four years working for Aunty, making the right sounds becomes an automatic reflex. Perhaps I’m not BBC material. Coming up here has taught me a few things. I’m a Mackenzie too. I have a tough soul. I’m not what Oxford tried to make me. I’ve been doing a lot of re-thinking, lately, about who I am and where I’m going, and first I’m determined on moral honesty. I don’t have a scrap of pity for Fortuny.’

‘Who killed him?’

‘Earle, I think.’

‘It could have been you.’

‘Yes, it could. You could make a good case out of casting me as the villain, and showing how I followed Earle to finish off the job.’

‘Why did you follow him?’

‘You don’t think I’m the villain?’

‘I think, like you, that the case is a good one.’

He laughed. ‘You’re not certain, are you? You think I’ve got it in me to have done it.

I said nothing. He eyed me steadily.

‘This would be an excellent place to confess. After I had got it off my chest I could decide whether to take the consequences or not. I might even dodge them altogether by a treacherous attack on yourself. I might be armed, had you thought of that? I could be holding a gun in one of these pockets.’

‘But you’re not. You’re romanticizing.’

Now I was sure of the bitter twist to his mouth. ‘Yes, you’re right. I’m still twenty-seven. It isn’t an age when moral honesty comes easily.’ He caught up a chip of rock and hurled it violently into emptiness: it vanished silently. He sat moodily staring towards the surf, invisible below. ‘I thought there was a chance of what happened.’

‘Of Earle’s killing him?’

He nodded. ‘Earle can lose his head. When I told him about Fortuny he went nearly crazy. I felt there was a chance that he wouldn’t stop at thrashing him and it gave me a queer thrill. Can you understand that? I was crazy too. I felt that at least I’d found a way to be even with him.’

‘Then you were crazy.’

‘Yes, I admit it. Yet perhaps not as crazy as you are thinking. You’re an abolitionist, I’m not so sure: I think there are men whom society should get rid of.’

‘Men like Fortuny?’

He shook his head, but reluctantly. ‘Perhaps with Fortuny that’s going too far. But it’s an argument that retentionists have tended to overlook that execution purges us of killers. They get led astray by red herrings such as the elements of revenge and prevention. They are irrelevant. The question is simply one of the disposal of the men who kill.’

‘That solution would leave a killer in our midst.’

‘Perhaps we could devise automatic execution.’

‘You can’t get rid of the moral guilt.’

‘It might be worth it.’

‘It has never been found so.’

Alex dug into his pockets. ‘I’ve no doubt you’re right. I’m just a foolish young man trying to question everything. And the fact is that I didn’t stay crazy for long – I got on the road and tried to head Earle off.’

‘That was why you followed him.’

‘Of course. I thought I could catch him in the MG. He had two hours’ start but it’s seven hundred miles and I knew the road a lot better than he did.’

‘And if you caught him?’

‘I would have tried to argue sense into him. I admit that probably he wouldn’t have listened. But there was a chance that I could have got there first and warned Fortuny. At least I might have exerted a calming influence.’

‘But you didn’t catch him. Or get here first.’

‘I didn’t know that he would drive so far and so fast. By Stirling I was sure I must be ahead of him, and that probably he’d lost himself getting round Glasgow.’

I nodded, because this was credible in the days before the spur from the motorway was completed. Either you followed the slow A73 or continued towards Glasgow and hoped. The latter, if you didn’t possess special knowledge, could turn out to be a frustrating adventure.

‘What time did you leave Stirling?’

‘I was away by half-past eight. I kept to the main road and kept going fast. But obviously I didn’t catch up with Earle.’

‘He spent the night at Pitlochry.’

‘So I’ve been told.’

‘He didn’t leave until nine.’

‘But that’s seventy or eighty up the road.’

‘Do you still have the hotel bill for where you stayed in Stirling?’

Alex was silent a few moments. ‘I do have the hotel bill,’ he said. ‘But if you’re intending to cast me as the villain that proves nothing, either way. I was at the Royal. I could have left earlier. I could well have been here ahead of Earle. But then I would have to have hidden my car, made myself invisible, and divined where they would meet by supersensory perception.’

‘Would that really have been necessary?’

He was silent again.

‘What time do you say you arrived in Kyleness?’

‘I’m not sure of the precise time. It was something after 4 p.m.’

‘Did you meet any traffic between here and the junction?’

He shook his head. ‘Should I have done?’

‘Why didn’t you call at the hotel, where Fortuny was staying?’

‘Well, I thought I should talk to Anne first.’

‘You were so confident that you had beaten Earle to it.’

‘If you say so. But I wanted her viewpoint.’

‘It could also have been for a different reason. You could have known that Fortuny was out.’

This time Alex was silent for longer. His head inclined broodingly towards the

breakers; his hands, thrust hard into the pockets, did give an impression that he was clutching concealed weapons.

'Where did you park?'

'Up there in a passing place. I could see the commotion going on here.'

'You walked down and faded into the commotion.'

'No. I walked down and asked what was going on.'

'Who was present there?'

'Well, there were the fishermen. Uncle Iain was just leaving. But after that all sorts of people arrived, including Earle and Anne. And then the police.'

'Your Uncle Robert?'

'I don't remember seeing him. Aunt Ailsie was there and Cousin Beattie. Aunt Ailsie was very pale and Beattie was snivelling when they landed the body.'

'How was Earle behaving?'

'He looked thunderstruck. He was standing over there by himself. Anne was behaving like an idiot. She thought he had done it, no doubt about that.'

'Where was your grandfather?'

'He came back with Uncle. They were both of them looking pretty blue.'

'Did your uncle give a hand with the body?'

'I don't think he touched it. But the police arrived as they were swinging it in.'

'What else did you see?'

His shoulders hunched. 'I was convinced that Earle had done it, too. I was watching him. The guilt seemed written in him. The police must have spotted it, without what he did afterwards. It was like watching a film that somehow was real. Nothing could change what was going to happen. There was the victim, there was the culprit, and the film just had to keep coming off the reel.'

'Yet Earle didn't kill him.'

'You don't know that.'

'I know it, and so does the rest of Kylie.'

'You're guessing. If the family knows anything, it hasn't been dropped in my hearing.'

'Perhaps they have a reason for that.'

He picked up another rock splinter and sent it spinning into emptiness. I cursed the still-increasing darkness that was hiding his expressions from me.

'I've admitted that I could have done it. I wouldn't have needed to hide my car, either. And the family wouldn't have split – that's one of the advantages of being a Mackenzie. And if I had done it I could live with my guilt, I've found that out about myself. I might regret it but I could put it behind me and keep my face turned to the future. I hated Fortuny. Well, now he's dead, and I can't hate him any longer. But he had to die for that to happen, and I won't be dishonest and say I'm not glad. And I don't pity him, not as Fortuny, but just the man in him like myself: the man in his terror going over this cliff. For the rest he deserved all he got.' He paused, a little breathless. 'And if Earle did it, I hope he feels about it like I would. I hope he gets away with it and that it doesn't hang on his conscience. Fortuny was rotten. He should take it to the grave with him, there shouldn't be any grief left behind.'

'Did you do it?'

He made an odd little gesture. 'Does it matter whether I did it?'

'It may come to a straight question of who is going to jail for twenty years.'

His pale face glimmered towards me. 'I didn't, but you can never be certain of

that. The proof is negative. I might well have killed him and for a time I was hoping that someone else would. That will have to be good enough. You can put it to Sinclair. I don't care how you wrap it up. I owe it to Earle to be the suspect if that's what it takes to get him off.'

'You couldn't give me a little more? To help me convince him?'

He got up off the stones. 'You can go to hell. When it comes to a straight question of twenty years I can look after myself as well as the next man.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

MY ANORAK HAD been scarcely adequate for the rigours of an evening in Kylie and I was happy to linger a little by the parlour fire when we got back to the Mackenzie house. James and his wife were the only others present. She sat placidly knitting a gorgeous sweater. He sat smoking a big, long-stemmed pipe of the sort you can buy in gift shops in Oslo. He looked up to give me a keen glance when I entered the parlour alone.

'Have you seen young Alex?'

'He went up to his room.'

He nodded and pointed to the decanter with his pipe. I helped myself. I was finding that in these latitudes Scotch was less of a luxury and more a way of life. I carried my glass to the hearth and stood basking in the comfortable warmth. Mrs Mackenzie's needles clicked cheerfully and her husband drew unhurried puffs.

'Is it cool outbye?'

'It is.'

'I heard you had a crack with Robbie.'

This didn't surprise me. I imagined Robert Mackenzie's first move would have been to phone the head of the clan.

'Are you further forward?'

'I found his daughter interesting.'

'She's a wilful lassie,' Mrs Mackenzie said. 'I doubt she's been spoiled. With all the laddies to tease her you cannot wonder if her head has been turned.'

'Robbie you can trust,' James Mackenzie said. 'Robbie was always a douce laddie. And Ailsie has a good heart, though sometimes her manner is a wee brisk.' He puffed rapidly once or twice. 'What had Alex to say?'

'He accounted for his movements on Tuesday and Wednesday.'

'He is a discreet lad.'

'I think you may say that.'

'Aye. In that he takes after Colin.'

'But you would not think him Colin's son,' put in Mrs Mackenzie. 'It is hard to ken who the lad favours. It will be from his mother's side, I am thinking. There is not black eyes among the Mackenzies.'

'There was Alistair Mackenzie,' her husband said. 'But you would not ken him, he was from Harris.'

'They are no near kin, James.'

'They are not far away. We have called them cousins since before the Union.'

Mrs Mackenzie seemed moved to dispute this and her husband seemed content with the change of subject, so I drank up briefly and said my goodnights and reluctantly withdrew from the comfortable fire. I was weary after my long day, but I still had some work that would not wait. In the silence of my room I unbuckled my

briefcase, uncapped my pen and began to write. My notes were selective rather than detailed, or I would have been scribbling until the dawn. You will recall that they were required to stretch back to my initial sparring with Inspector Sinclair. They ranged through my interview with Earle, my second encounter with Sinclair, the conversation at dinner, and my visit to the hotel; and ended with what I found not the least troubling section, my exchange with Alex on the clifftop. I had covered much ground. What concerned me professionally was that I had failed to uncover a firm lead. I was extending the list of suspects almost to infinity without arriving at a prospect who would appeal to Sinclair. There was scarcely a Mackenzie who could be eliminated, nor any other member of the trawler's crew. I might lay more definite suspicion at one or two doors, but none of it supported by evidential fact. I had my instincts, but they were irrelevant: no doubt Sinclair had plenty of his own. And of anything more substantial I could detect no glimmer in all my scribblings.

It was while I was revolving this depressing conclusion that I heard a faint rustle at my door, and glancing up I saw that an envelope had been slipped underneath it. I rose quietly and moved swiftly but I was too late to catch the messenger. The envelope was addressed: 'George', and I recognized Anne's flaring handwriting. I opened it. 'Dear George [I read], I had to write this in the bathroom. Mother – oh dear!!! George, get Uncle Iain on his own. He saw what happened. Grandad rang him at the quay after Earle left. I *know* he went up to watch. They *all* know it wasn't Earle – you must get them to talk to you!!! George I love Earle. If he still wants me I'll have him. *Please* George. Anne.'

I preserved that letter, which is why I can reproduce the punctuation with so much confidence. But it told me nothing I hadn't guessed anyway, nor suggested a line that I didn't intend to follow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I WAS TIRED and slept late. When I awoke the day was brilliant behind my curtain, and I could hear the whooping of gulls down at the quay and that distinctive northern sound, the chuckle of a curlew. I rose and drew the curtains. The view that morning was ethereal. Lit by morning sun it had a fairy-like texture that seemed to belong to some other world. The colours were so bold and vivid and the space and definition so lyrically clear that my southron soul would scarcely credit that I was yet in the island that contained London. This was different, a more precious existence, and I longed for an opportunity simply to expand in it. But I had other business. I hastened my toilet and dressed and went down, to find the breakfast table deserted except by James Mackenzie, who was deep in his paper.

He greeted me distantly. 'You slept well, then.'

'I had a long day yesterday.'

'Aye, it's a fair step to Kylie. And you busied yourself after that.' He glanced over the paper. 'What's for today, then?'

'Inspector Sinclair will be here later.'

James Mackenzie grunted.

'I would like to have a word with Iain.'

'You will find him at the boat.'

He rustled his paper and disappeared behind it: it was the *Stornaway Gazette*. I helped myself to porridge and pancakes and a large cup of tepid coffee. Before I got Iain on his own I would very much have liked to get Anne on *her* own, but I had a premonition that she intended to avoid this, which the presence of Verna would make only too easy. Verna was playing her role with zest. She was being the most sorrowing of widows and the most devoted of mothers. It was a role that included among its advantages the excuse to drop me like a hot brick. I had noted this with amusement on the previous evening but this morning my feelings were less charitable: I could bear to be snubbed by Verna, but not if it meant isolation from Anne. And it was as I feared. I found them in the parlour, preparing to take Helen for her airing; Anne resolutely refused to catch my eye and Verna refused to acknowledge my existence. They were busy: I had no excuse, nor would Anne have responded if I had found one; so I gave it up for the present and set out on my errand to the quay.

I went down by the path, and at once it was apparent that from the path one could not see the rocks below. The mass of red sandstone, standing out boldly, entirely concealed the scene of the tragedy. A heathery slope fell away at its foot and down this the path descended to the quay; on the seaward side the slope dropped precipitously to an apron of pebble beach. I paused where the path ran closest to the rock. A faint track connected it with the cleft I had discovered. The cleft represented, in fact, a useful short cut for anyone bound for the House of Reay. I went a few yards

up the track: there was no chance of footprints, but I saw signs confirming recent use: freshly bruised heather-bush, and a dislodged pebble with one side weathered and one smooth. But who would be taking that way from the quay? The fishermen, apparently, preferred their cars. It was Iain Mackenzie who walked up from the quay, his house being but the short distance above. Did he also then walk up to the hotel . . . or did one of the inmates walk down to the quay? I recalled the sound of Beattie's voice in conversation with someone, which had ceased with Robert Mackenzie's clumsy rattling of the door. Could that have been Iain? Was something going on there into which Fortuny had accidentally blundered? Was it Fortuny's silence that the killer had wanted, even more than his death? I stood pondering this. It was a considerable theory to base on the evidence of a humble track. And yet it fitted. I now knew for certain that Iain had been told that the fight was taking place. And before that he had been recalled to Kylie: the excuse of the worn worm-gear was too thin. Would it not have been to deal with a threat more serious than Fortuny's attempts to carry off Anne? I returned to the path. It approached nearest to the edge at about the halfway point from the quay. I paced out forty yards through shin-deep heather before I got to where I could see the parapet and the rocks. It was possible, but why would a man make this detour through the spiteful heather – unless, as Robertson had suggested, it was because he knew that there was something to be seen?

The gulls began yelping; I turned towards the quay. Iain Mackenzie had appeared from a shed. He stood in the doorway, his eyes intent on me. He had something in his hand. It looked like a gun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

'HAVE YOU a licence for that?'

'Aye.' The chill grey eyes were regarding me coolly. He had remained by the shed watching me as I came down the path and along the quay. He was wearing dungarees and his hands were black with grease. The gun was an expensive double-barrelled twelve-bore and he held it cradled lightly in the crook of his arm.

'Do you carry it on board with you?'

'Ach, what for? You cannot eat Mother Carey's chickens. But there are a deal of grouse up the braes, and all manner of wildfowl on the lochans.'

'Why are you carrying the gun this morning?'

'You just chance to find it in my hand. You ken the womenfolk cannot bear guns, and mother will not have it in the house. So I keep it down here, in the workshop, where I can give it a rub and a pull-through.' He broke it to show it was empty, then skied it and squinted through each barrel. 'Are you for shooting?'

I shrugged. 'I see enough of it.'

'Aye, that will be cutting targets with handguns. But I mean tramping the heather and the birchwoods, and bringing home a blackcock, or maybe a goose.'

'I don't have the opportunity.'

'That's a pity, man. Now and then you should take a gun for company. It is grand to be striding out alone among the hills as God made them. It is not the shooting, you ken. That's just a wee flourish, bringing home something good for the pot. It is feeling you're a man abune your micht in a great country where you belong. The beasts kill each other to live, and with a gun to hand you are lord among them.' He held up the finger that lacked a joint. 'There's something I got from my love of a gun. Ach, I blew it off when I was a bairn and had more curiosity than respect.'

'You keep the gun locked up?'

'Do you think I'm daft? I have a safe place for it in the workshop. And talking of that, we will just step in. I have something there you'll be wanting to see.'

I followed him into the workshop. It was quite large and was equipped with a lathe and a vertical drill. Along one side ran a heavy zinc-topped bench which was fitted below with a nest of drawers. Iain slid one open; it was lined with oily waste, and in it he placed the gun, after giving it a wipe. Then he picked up something from a box on the bench and dumped it weightily in my hands.

'There's your exhibit.'

It was the worm-gear, a hefty threaded cylinder of solid metal. It weighed most of a stone, and I was glad to rest it on the bench while I examined it. Sure enough, the thread was worn. I could see flattened areas in the spiral of steel. But whether the flattening amounted to a near mechanical failure I was not engineer enough to decide. I wiped my hands on a pull of waste.

'Wouldn't you have needed help to remove that gear?'

‘It would have been useful, there is no doubt, but I did not wish to keep the lads from their dram.’

‘Not your mechanic?’

‘Ach, he lacks experience, and I ken the machinery like the back of my hand. When it comes to the *Kylie Rose* I’m for doing a job by myself.’

‘You intend to maintain that you were here alone.’

‘Have you heard anything to contradict it?’

I shook my head. ‘But you could contradict it. And that might jog a few other memories.’

Slowly he took a key from his pocket and locked the drawer containing the gun. Then he wiped his hands on the dungarees and began casually peeling them off. ‘I was alone. No question of that.’

‘You were alone when Sambrooke went up the hill.’

‘Aye.’

‘Did you see him?’

‘I was down in the bilge.’

‘Yet I believe you heard that telephone ring.’ I pointed to the instrument, which was installed in a box just inside the door.

Iain went on calmly pulling off the dungarees. ‘If you look outside you will see the bell. We had one fitted that I could hear on the boat. You can hear that bell ring across on Ronsay.’

‘Then do you agree that there was a call.’

He paused. ‘*Aye*.’

‘From your father.’

‘You seem to ken it.’

‘Telling you what was afoot.’

‘If you ken so much you’ll ken that.’

‘And I think I know this,’ I said. ‘You left your job here and went up to watch. You went up that path and bore off to the right, and stood in the cleft to watch the fight.’

He rolled the dungarees and laid them on the bench. ‘You have not been wasting your time, then,’ he said smoothly. ‘It is not every person in Kylie who kens the cleft in the rocks yonder. Sinclair missed it, that’s sure, though he was led away by arresting Sambrooke. But man, you just take a stroll round the place and you read its secrets like a book.’

‘Then you were up there.’

‘I was there later. I did not go up to watch the fight.’

‘How much later?’

‘It was not long. I had nearly finished when father rang.’

‘Shall we walk up there now?’

He hesitated. ‘You ken we’re away on the tide before noon. I am willing to give you what help I can, but I have a few small things to see to.’

‘I would like you to walk up there.’

His grey eyes measured me. ‘Ach well. If nothing else will suit. But I doubt it will get you no forwarder, and it is like to put me behind.’

He took his serge jacket from a nail and led the way along the quay. I glanced towards the house and, sure enough, James Mackenzie stood in his porch, watching us. For the rest Kylie seemed deserted; the road was empty of traffic and people. Yet

I had a strange feeling that other eyes were upon us as we began to climb the steep path. Kylie seemed almost to be holding its breath on that still and brilliant morning. We reached the point nearest the cut-off to the beach.

'I would like to stop here,' I said.

Iain halted agreeably. There was nothing but casualness in his sauntering manner, his enquiring glance.

'Was it from here you caught sight of the body?'

'It was maybe not from this precise place.'

'From where then?'

'I did not keep the path. I strayed over to take a view of the beach.'

'To see what?'

'Ach, nothing special. You ken I am a wandering sort of man.'

'But through that tangle of heather?'

'What is heather to me? I tramp it for miles when I'm after a grouse.'

'Show me where it was.'

Without any reluctance he kicked his way through the heather, and brought us to the spot where he had seen me standing earlier.

'This will be about it. Yon is the rock where he was spread out like a starfish. His head was battered, they telled you that? The blood has been washed away since.'

'Look up the cliff.'

'Aye, I'm looking.'

'You can see the parapet from where he fell.'

'You can well see it. Had I been here sooner I would have seen who was whirling him off.'

'There is nobody to say you were not here sooner.'

'There is nobody to say I was.'

I stared into his eyes and he stared back; he wasn't going to give me an inch.

'It is a difficult question for you, man.'

'Is that all you have to say?'

'You ken that I'm for helping you, but this is a matter you must take or leave. I cannot answer fairer.'

'I think you were here sooner.'

'But you have not a witness.'

'What makes you think that Sambrooke saw nothing?'

He rocked his head. 'If Sambrooke's your witness, you have not made much of him up till now. Ach, no. It is the way I am saying. You will have to believe me or you will not. There was no witness, and if there were you would not hear a whisper of him in Kylie.'

The thrust direct. I kept my face blank. But now I was certain that there had been a witness. I was talking to him. What I had to decide was whether it ended there, or not.

'Let's go on.'

'Aye, if you will. Just bear in mind that I'm catching a tide.'

'We'll take the short cut up to the bend.'

'It is what I was about to recommend.'

He plunged away across the heather in a direct line for the cleft. His familiarity with it was obvious and he was careless if he showed it. He was secure, that was the message. I could suspect but I could not prove. I could run with my suspicions to

Sinclair, but never would the Sheriff get a sight of Iain Mackenzie. I came up close with him as we entered the cleft.

'This is a way you'll often be using.'

'Aye, if I have any business with Robbie. I'm not one for ever jumping in a car.'

'You've been using it lately.'

He halted. 'Who says so?'

'The track shows evidence of recent use.'

'And why would that be me?'

'It's a short cut to your cousin's. Your crew members seem to prefer their cars.'

He hesitated, his face expressionless: then his powerful shoulders twitched. 'Aye, it's true. I've been going there lately. But you must not think I'm a hard drinker, for that.'

'The House of Reay has other attractions.'

He hesitated again. 'And what would they be?'

'Social attractions. The company in the bar. Your cousin and his wife. Their daughter.'

'Ach, well. We are close kinsmen.'

'Your cousin was worried about his daughter and Fortuny.'

Iain stood still. 'He talked to you of that?'

'Perhaps I rather forced the confidence upon him.'

'More than like.' His eyes were keen. 'And doubtless you'll have gripped the wrong end of the hawse. The lassie is a flirt, that's certain, she is fond of trifling with the laddies' attentions. But it would go no further than that. Beattie Mackenzie is nobody's fool.'

'Your cousin thought it went further.'

'Ach, Robbie talks. You must not heed him. It is as like that Beattie would take up with me as she would with that southron blackguard.'

'With you . . . ?'

'That's a manner of speaking!' For a moment his expression was fierce. 'You have got it wrong, that's the short and long of it. But I shall be having a word with Robbie.'

He turned abruptly and strode out of the cleft: I felt the tingling thrill of a successful shot. The dart had fleshed. I had found a target that Iain could not conceal was sensitive. I followed him quickly. He came to a stand on the rough ground in the bend: I caught him measuring with his eye the distance between it and the parapet.

'Say twenty yards.'

'Aye. It needed a strong laddie to haul up the body.'

'Or a desperate man.'

'You may say that. He would need to make a spang at getting rid of it.'

'If it had gone in the sea he would have succeeded.'

'It would not have beached this side of the Minch.'

'Since it didn't, his best move was to report it. To get Sambrooke arrested and to confuse the issue.'

Iain merely shrugged. He led off again and went to stare down from the parapet. His burly figure stood out firmly against the moving sea and the bright sky. He looked as much at home there as an eagle, his feet planted firmly on the broken rock, the sea light playing on his bold features and on the bruised scar that disfigured his forehead. Here he belonged. Kylie had made him, and Kylie would preserve him.

What had he to fear?

'Were you at the hotel last night?'

He paused before replying. 'Why do you ask me?'

'I heard Beattie in conversation with someone. Someone other than her parents or Sergeant Robertson.'

'Ach, the place is open for custom.'

'There were no customers present at the time.'

'Then it will have been one of her beaus from the village.'

'The conversation was taking place upstairs.'

'And you are thinking it was me?'

'That's what I'm asking.'

'And why would I be holding conversations with Beattie? Or if I did, what would be strange, she being my own cousin's bairn?'

'You don't wish to answer?'

'I cannot see the need for it. If you wish to believe it was me you will. I was abroad last evening. I do not deny it, but only to work on the *Kylie Rose*.'

'Alone.'

'Quite alone.'

'You seem never to work on that boat in company.'

He was silent for a while, his grey eyes staring unmoved at the slanting waves. 'It may be that I did take a turn yonder.'

'While I was at the hotel.'

'It was not long after.'

'You went there to eavesdrop.'

'I am not admitting that. And you yourself have placed me above stairs.'

'Where Beattie joined you.'

'That would be her privilege.'

'What did you have to say to Beattie?'

'It may be some words of admonition.'

'Such as to keep her head, and to stay away from me?'

Iain swayed his shoulders. 'Just listen,' he said. 'While I've been standing here I have been thinking. It is Inspector Sinclair's notion that whoever killed Fortuny got rid of the knife by pitching it into the sea. Now I am not precisely of that opinion. You ken that a good knife is not a cheap toy. The laddies will pay plenty for a handsome blade with a stag's-horn grip and a fanciful sheath. I am following my own feeling – I would not part easy. I would be for wiping the knife on the heather. And down below there are tags of heather, and I recall seeing blood on them when I first got here.'

'You are saying . . . the killer still has the knife?'

'Just so. He'll be wearing it this very moment.' With a sudden movement he swept up his jacket and the slop beneath it. 'Even like myself.'

I gazed at the weapon he had revealed. It had the stag's-horn grip that he had referred to. It had a sheath of shagreen mounted with silver, and a silver monogram: I. M. I looked from it to him.

'It's just a theory, you ken.' His eyes had a gruesome sort of relish. 'But I thought that Sinclair may have gone astray there, him not being so advised on the ways of us fisher-laddies.' He made to move off.

'Wait!' I exclaimed.

‘Ach.’ He shook his head. ‘I cannot. The knife I need, you must seek another. And the tide, you ken, waits for no man.’

He strode away, and I let him go; if I wanted that knife I must fetch Robertson. But what would be the use? If indeed it was the murder weapon it would have been well cleansed by now. And could I swallow that anyway? There was a false ring to it, to the theatrical way the knife was introduced, to the way he had been feeding my suspicion, as though he were quite content to be its mark. A put-up job! For an indignant moment I wondered whether he was in cahoots with Sinclair: whether this pair of wily Scots had conspired to bemuse the inconvenient southron. Well, I would find out. The weak link was Beattie. Beattie alone I was sure I could crack. I set off up the road to the hotel resolved to get the truth from at least one Mackenzie.

Robbie met me on the steps; his mien was welcoming but wary. ‘You have missed Robertson, Superintendent. He is away having words with Cousin Andrew.’

‘I wish to speak to your daughter.’

‘Ach, if you had but given us a ring! She and Ailsie have driven over to Ulla – it is about new clothes, you can depend on that.’

My stare was not friendly. ‘When will she be back?’

‘I cannot well say, Superintendent. It may be that they will have lunch in Ulla, and visit kin on the way home.’

‘Wasn’t this trip a little sudden?’

‘Aye, isn’t that just the way with the ladies?’

‘It seems to be the way with yours,’ I said bitingly.

Robbie Mackenzie smothered a grin.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I WENT BACK down towards the village but I did not return to the house. Instead, I squatted on the slope amongst the heather and watched the trawler prepare for sea. I was being over-reached, that was plain, and I could think of no way to counter it. I was a policeman, but I was shorn of my powers: I couldn't take a policeman's grip on the problem. I couldn't interrogate. I could ask questions but I couldn't apply pressure. I couldn't commandeer evidence and I couldn't isolate my suspects. I couldn't build up that psychological tension in which events develop and clarify, I was a paper tiger. I could watch, and guess, and try to keep face.

I lit my pipe sombrely. At the quay below me preparations were quietly building in tempo. A hose had been run from the storage tank to the trawler and I could hear the soft moan of a pump. Then the crew arrived in their cars, which they parked with care between the sheds, and in ones and twos they went aboard to stow their kit in the deckhouse aft. They did not come alone. Other cars decanted wives, sweethearts and parents, and people strayed down from the village to stand watching and chatting. The trawler's sailing was an event: I wondered if her docking had been one, too. It might be that I was staring now at witnesses who had vital information to communicate. But that was all I could do. I had no brief. I couldn't grab them for a session in the sweat-box. And if Sinclair had done so they must have defeated him, along with the crew and Tom Cobley and all. I caught some of them staring at me, it seemed to me with triumph, and then turning away with a laugh or a swagger.

A car pulled up above me and Robertson joined me in the heather. One glance at his doleful face told me that he had nothing fresh to contribute. He squatted beside me, frowning down at the lively scene on the quay. They had finished refuelling now and were coiling the hose in its stowage.

'So they are away, sir.'

I nodded. We both recognized it as a defeat. They were away, and we had learned nothing, and except from them we were never likely to. If I could, would I have stopped this sailing? If I could, I would have picked up Iain. But Sinclair had to live here afterwards, and there were no solid grounds for doing one or the other.

'What was your business with Andrew Mackenzie?'

'Just a point in his statement, sir. He was outside fiddling with his car for a while before he joined the others in the bar.'

'Anything in it?

'Ach, no, But I thought it was worth going over again. He was not out there above five minutes. Or if he was he will not say so.'

And nobody else would, that was certain. Add Andrew Mackenzie to the list of possibles. But if he had voluntarily admitted his absence there was little reason to doubt his account.

'We're left with Sambrooke, then.'

‘Aye. The inspector must just make up his mind.’

‘I doubt whether he should charge him.’

‘That is my opinion, sir. But I cannot speak for the inspector.’

There was no more to say. We sat on silently, tasting the dregs of our failure, watching the scene below that seemed to symbolize it, to draw a line across the account. The last goodbyes were being said, the last fond kisses exchanged. Behind us, in the garden of the Mackenzie house, stood James Mackenzie and his wife, Verna, and Anne, with Helen in her arms. The crew went aboard: Iain stood in the wheelhouse: there was a faint, distant rumble of diesels; then the warps were cast off, the water stirred beneath her stern, and she began to ease away and to turn towards the sea. I saw Iain’s hand move. The siren hooted thrice. Those left on the quay raised a cheer. Then she was fully turned and driving away from us and beginning already, insensibly, to shrink. Exit in triumph the *Kylie Rose*, mission accomplished. The drama was over. Aboard her, the crew began to vanish into the deckhouse, except for the fair-haired mechanic, who stood gazing over the rail. I got up irritably.

‘When is Sinclair arriving?’

‘I’m expecting him this afternoon, sir.’

‘Let’s go up to the hotel and have a drink.’

‘Thank you, sir. I feel I could use one.’

We got in his car and he turned in the driveway. Below, people were trailing away from the quay. The *Kylie Rose* had reached the passage between the islands: I could still see the mechanic standing lonely at the rail.

‘Last night at the hotel – did you see Iain Mackenzie?’

Robertson hesitated, his hand on the gear lever. ‘I cannot say I did, sir. To the best of my knowledge, you were the only visitor there last night.’

‘I heard someone in conversation with Beattie Mackenzie.’

‘Ach, that would be the southron laddie, Collins.’

‘The *what*?’

Robertson looked startled. ‘The southron laddie. He bides there, you ken, when the boat is in port.’

‘An English crew member?’

‘Just so. The mechanic laddie, James Collins.’

I jerked my finger towards the *Kylie Rose*, where the fair head was yet visible. ‘Him?’

‘Aye – that’s him. His home is awa in England, you ken. So he just bides here with Robert Mackenzie. It would be him you heard with Miss Beattie.’

There is a school of Zen called Rinzai that sets its students insoluble problems. The problems do not appear to be insoluble but in point of fact they are. And answers are demanded: the student *must* answer: he may be beaten if he fails. He is set to meditate on his problem until it drives him into a condition bordering on lunacy. Then he is ripe. The watchful Master, judging the moment, throws him a hint: enlightenment follows. Because there *was* an answer, though not that which the student had been desperately seeking. And so it was with me at that moment; the insoluble problem was saturating my brain; I had every fact and aspect of it before me with the solution in every way blocked. And then the hint was dropped, and like the bewildered student I had my moment of intoxicating enlightenment. I could yet be wrong, but I refused to believe so; and proof was waiting at the end of a telephone.

‘This Collins – did you take his statement?’
‘Aye, I did,’ Robertson nodded.
‘Did you ask him his home address?’
I knew what he must answer, and so he did:
‘The port of Lowestoft.’

CHAPTER FORTY

THERE WAS A pay-box in the hall in the House of Reay and I wasted no time using it. The call took a minute or two to go through and I stood tapping my fingers impatiently. While we were waiting Robert Mackenzie appeared. He began to advance with his ingratiating smile. I made a peremptory sign and the smile froze; he turned aside into the bar, with an offended expression. And still they were sorting out lines to Lowestoft.

'What else can you tell me about Collins?'

'He seemed a decent sort of laddie,' Robertson frowned. 'He signed on with the *Kylie Rose* at Wick. He told me that the East Coast fishing was almost done for.'

'Was he often with Beattie Mackenzie?'

'He was, but I think there was a tiff between them.'

'With Iain Mackenzie?'

'Aye. He was helping Iain down on the boat.'

'Go into the bar and keep an eye on Robbie.'

Robertson did as he was bid. At last the lines south were cleared and a curt voice announced Lowestoft Police. I introduced myself.

'I want information about an incident that happened in Lowestoft two years ago. A TV actor, Fortuny, was attacked by a fisherman armed with a knife.'

'Just a minute, sir.'

Another delay while the call was switched to CID. Then a second curt voice. I repeated my enquiry.

'What information do you require, sir?'

'The name of the fisherman and his present whereabouts.'

'Hold on a minute, sir. I'll get you the officer who handled the case.'

The third voice was less curt, but I had to explain myself again.

'Yes, sir. I remember the case well. The chummie's name was Collins.'

And that was it. I leaned hard against the box, listening to the distant voice babbling on. But it was unimportant, mere decoration, the case was solved from that moment. Yet the details were all I could have wished.

'It was rather a sad business, sir. There's no doubt that Collins was provoked, but he got six months just the same. A bit of an example, sir. We'd been going through a bad patch for violence.'

'Did his girl stand by him?'

'No, sir. She took off to London with Fortuny.'

'What happened when Collins got out?'

'Well, he was upset, sir, as you can imagine. And he had it rough from his old man, who's a strict chapel-goer, a Plymouth Brethren. And of course, he couldn't get a job. None of the skippers wanted to know him.'

'So what did he do?'

‘He signed on a coaster. But that was over a year ago.’

‘Going north?’

‘I couldn’t say, sir. I’ll make inquiries, if you wish.’

But it wasn’t necessary. I could track him now, that fair-headed youth with his load of trouble. North to the Tyne, perhaps to Leith, but onwards again till he berthed at Wick. And at Wick there were Scottish skippers who knew nothing of his record and perhaps cared less: and one, the *Kylie Rose*, from the far north-west, as far from Lowestoft as a man might go. He had gone with Iain, he had been accepted, the Mackenzies had taken him under their wing. And like a Mackenzie, he had been protected both from Sinclair and from myself.

‘Sir, is Collins in trouble?’

‘I’m afraid he is.’

‘Will you want us to contact his parents?’

‘Just leave it for the moment. I’ll ring you back when I have something definite.’

I hung up; but I hesitated before putting through my next call, to Sinclair. My mind was busy dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s of this strange affair. It would have begun with James Mackenzie’s phone call to Iain, at Ullapool, on the Tuesday, informing Iain of Fortuny’s harassment of Anne and no doubt of his impudent flirtation with Beattie. I thought it unlikely that Fortuny’s name had been mentioned to Collins at that time, but he might well have been teased about an English guest who was making eyes at Robert’s daughter. The boat docked. The steering fault was genuine. Ian had detained Collins to help him strip the gear. When James rang the quay his news amused Iain, but he did not let it interrupt the job in hand. He did, however, tell it to Collins, and at some point Fortuny’s name was dropped. I could imagine the young man staring aghast and the colour fading from his cheeks.

‘What was that name?’

‘Fortuny. What’s the matter, you daft loon?’

‘He was the bastard who pinched my girl and got me six months in Norwich jail!’

‘Ach, now, you cannot know that!’

‘I’m going up to the rocks to see.’

‘Man, be reasonable. We have this job on.’

‘If it’s the same man I’m going to smash him!’

Like someone crazed he rushed up the ladder, jumped ashore and began running. Iain, after some choice Gaelic oaths, took alarm and went up after him. He was too late. When he came through the cleft he saw Collins kneeling over the still body. Blood was welling from Fortuny’s back and the bloody knife was in Collins’s hand.

‘Ach, you crazy lunatic – what have you done?’

‘I’ve given the bastard what he deserved!’

‘You’ve killed him, you mad fool!’

‘I’ve killed him, and I’d do it again!’

Iain was appalled, but he was a man of action. Collins had to be saved from his folly. He grabbed the knife and ran to hurl it over the cliff.

‘Now give me a hand to drag him up there!’

Together they hauled the body to the parapet. Struggling, they got it on to the low wall and pitched it off into space. But it struck the rock – and stuck.

‘Ach, the devil! We’ve done it now!’

There was no getting at the body again, except with help and climbing equipment.

‘Come away – let’s up to Robbie’s. We will have to put together a tale. The police

will never look in your direction – they will be too busy with Anne's young man.'

And so they arrived panting at the hotel to devise a simple, unshakable story; after which the crew were despatched to recover the body – and Iain phoned the police.

That was how it had gone; that was the reason why Iain had insisted he had stayed on alone; why he had made a bid to attract my suspicion when I began to be interested in Beattie and the House of Reay. Well, he would have his own explaining to do, depending upon how much Collins talked. If I was right, Iain Mackenzie might yet share the dock with his mechanic. I couldn't help that; my duty was to Earle. The Mackenzies must shift as best they could. They had indulged in the luxury of reckless loyalty and now they must pay the bill.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

I DID NOT return to the Mackenzie house and I discussed the development only with Robertson. It made no difference. There were more people on the quay when the trawler returned than when it sailed. I think most of Kylie turned up, even those from the crofts and farms, as though some obscure clan instinct warned them of a crisis in the affairs of the Mackenzies. The afternoon was fine as the morning had been and the sun was hot on the quay. If it had not been for the silent watchfulness of those assembled you might well have taken the occasion for some fete. But the quietness belied it: the quietness was ominous. I found myself wondering if we were in for trouble.

Sinclair had been in touch with the coastguards, who had relayed his message to the *Kylie Rose*. He had ordered Iain to put Collins under arrest and to return to port immediately. Presumably Iain was obeying. It would have been over two hours after he had sailed when he received the message, and on this calculation, with allowance for other factors, he should be arriving back at Kylie at half-past four. Sinclair had a man posted as lookout above while we waited in two cars on the quay; he had brought two other men with him, and the district constable: it passed for a show of force, in Kylie. We, too, were silent. How to handle this business must have been absorbing all Sinclair's thoughts. I saw him giving uncertain little glances towards the Mackenzie house, where James and the other inmates were watching from the garden. James had a mighty brass-bound telescope which he shot open with a snap that was audible on the quay; every five minutes he pointed it down the channel, then snapped it shut again with the same impatient motion. His wife and Iain's wife were standing by him. Verna, with Alex and Anne, stood nearer to the house. As time wore on I noticed Verna jiffling and eventually she sent Alex to fetch her a chair. Sinclair glanced at his watch.

'The boat is overdue.'

It was only a quarter to five.

'Won't the tide still be running?'

'Aye. But he could put steam on if he wanted to.'

'He may have had his nets out.'

'It is not likely. There is better trawling outside the Minch. I shall be getting in touch with the Protection Vessel if he does not show himself by five.'

But we had little longer to wait. At his next observation, James Mackenzie held his pose for some moments. Then he snapped the telescope shut for the last time and went to lay it in the house. Shortly afterwards our lookout hurried down.

'A trawler has just turned the point, sir.'

'Coming from southwards?'

'Aye, sir.'

Sinclair looked grim. 'It is as well to know that.'

We got out of the car and went to stand at the mooring; a murmur rose from the gathering about us. James Mackenzie and Alex left the house to come down, leaving the womenfolk in the garden.

'Here she comes now, sir.'

She was closer than I had expected. She came motoring out from behind an island. Her crew were ranged along the rails aft and Iain stood alone in the wheelhouse. She turned away from us, skirting the large island, then bore to starboard in a slow semicircle. Her speed fell off. She came drifting in to a precise landfall with cut engines. Sinclair was counting heads.

'Ach, eight of them! What have they done with our laddie?'

Unless he was secured below the fair-headed mechanic clearly was missing. The boat inched into its berth and there were ready hands to catch its warps. Iain came stiffly out of the wheelhouse. Sinclair jumped aboard to confront him.

'Where's Collins?'

Iain stared at the policeman. His strangely naked face was solemn. He humped his broad shoulders and made a gesture with the maimed hand. 'Lost him.'

'You what!'

'Lost him.'

Sinclair's dour face flushed with anger. 'You have touched at the Butt, you devil – you have put him ashore in Lewis!'

Silently Iain pointed to the mast; a blue house-flag was trailing from below the hounds. 'We lost him. He tried to swim for it. The current of the Roast sucked him under.'

Sinclair's mouth fell open and a murmurous sigh left the crowd. They had drawn closer, but now they parted respectfully to allow James Mackenzie to come striding through. He stepped on to the vessel.

'What's this, Iain?'

'Ach, the laddie did for himself.'

'What way?'

'He jumped overside as we were passing Skoma Head.'

'Ach! Into the Roast?'

'Aye. And the tide with two hours to run.'

'Ach, the poor soul!'

'He was gone before I could bring the boat back to him.'

They stood gazing concern at each other, while the crew looked on with glum faces. Sinclair's mouth closed again. He looked from one Mackenzie to another. I could see his hands working.

'Let's get this straight! Are you saying that Collins committed suicide?'

Iain shook his head sadly. 'I could not say that. I am thinking he was making a break for shore. We passed close in at Skoma, it might be two hundred yards or less. There is a bit of beach among the rocks. I would say that he had his eye on that.'

'And you let him jump?'

'I could not stop him. I had him by me in the wheelhouse. He kent fine he was under arrest and what for I was taking him back. He was sitting quietly in the corner and giving no offence at all. Then, when the boat began lumping in the Roast, he was past me in a flash and over the side.'

'Didn't you throw him a lifebelt?'

'Aye.' Iain indicated one that lay on the deck. It looked dry, but when Sinclair

caught it up a wet ring was left on the planks. ‘I cast it in, but he would not take it. He was swimming away towards the Head. I bawled the crew out to keep their eyes on him. Ach, he was sucked under in a minute.’

‘You bawled the crew out – were they not on deck?’

‘They were below when we entered the Roast.’

‘It was just you who saw him jump?’

‘I ken the others saw him struggling in the water.’

Sinclair flashed a fierce glare at the others. A tall, lean, bearded man stepped forward.

‘I saw the poor laddie in the water. It was just in the way Cousin Iain has told you.’

‘Couldn’t one of you have gone in for him?’

‘Ach, ach, such a thing would have been madness. It was clean in the eddy of the Roast, you ken. It will suck down boats, let alone men.’

‘Aye, he was dead when he jumped,’ Iain said. ‘The lifebelt and all would scarcely have saved him. I ken the poor laddie had once been in prison and he was over-desperate not to go back there.’

‘Then he talked?’

Iain bowed his head. ‘He let out a few words in the wheelhouse. It was he who did for Fortuny, and from what he said he had good reason. But no doubt you ken more of that than I do.’

Sinclair’s fists were squeezing tight. ‘I mind you said in your statement that he did not bide below with you.’

‘Ach, so it was. He went off with the others. I have been puzzling over that ever since he confessed.’

‘And doubtless you have an answer.’

Iain’s shoulders swayed. ‘I am just a simple fisherman, you ken. I would not set my opinion against the likes of yourself, or this grand gentleman from Scotland Yard. But I have a notion. I think that Collins spotted Fortuny when Fortuny was setting out from the hotel. So then he followed him, you ken, and did a quick job, and was back at the bar before he was missed.’

‘Ach, Iain, you’ve hit it!’ James Mackenzie exclaimed. ‘That must be the very way it happened. A man may step out of the bar for a moment, and who is likely to take note of that?’

The tall, lean cousin cleared his throat. ‘Now you have brought it to mind, I do recall it. I looked round to speak a word to the laddie, and he was just coming in by the toilet door.’

‘Aye, and pale he would be looking,’ James Mackenzie said.

‘He was, though I paid no attention at the time. The lads had been chasing their whisky with beer, and that is inclined to unsettle a man’s stomach.’

I felt a stab of sympathy for the baffled Sinclair. I took a step closer to the moored vessel. ‘Wouldn’t you agree—’ I stared hard at Iain – ‘that Collins would have needed help to get rid of the body?’

Iain hesitated very, very briefly, then gravely he shook his head. ‘I cannot well say that I agree, when I am aware that Collins was such a strong laddie. He was not big, but he was full of porridge. He could wrestle any man of the crew. I was thinking they will tell you he was well able to lug up a dead body, and roll it over a bit wall.’

‘And if he was so strong would he have drowned so easily?’

‘Ach, there is the shock of hitting the water, you ken. It is a factor that may drown the strongest swimmer, let alone such a current as Skoma Roast.’

I was at a play now, and I knew it. The reality had gone subtly out of that scene. The pathetic flag, the solemn faces, they were a production that had lost its conviction. I knew it, but Sinclair didn’t; Sinclair was still persuaded that he was dealing with the real. I wanted to tip him the wink, but I couldn’t. As long as he believed, the play would go on.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

BUT NOW I had become a spectator and as a spectator I am easily bored. I declined Sinclair's invitation to sit in on his fresh, almost frantic, round of statement-taking. I didn't feel equal to the Mackenzies either; I wanted the matter settled before I returned there; and I made up my mind not to linger in Kylie on a footing so awkward, both for them and for me. I had done my job; Earle was cleared. I had been Verna's trump card and she had played me. I knew better than to expect her gratitude and I surely had none to come from the Mackenzies. From Anne, perhaps, and Earle: but they could express it on a future occasion. I was expended. I could let my thoughts stray now to that long, two-day drive back to London.

I sat smoking by the peat fire in the lounge of the House of Reay while Sinclair did his business in a private room adjacent; I could at times hear his voice raised angrily, and the clump of feet as his customers came and went. Beattie and her mother were serving in the bar, but I had no more to say to either of them; if Beattie was concerned by the news of the latest tragedy she was hiding it beneath a phlegm that I would not have expected of her. Robert Mackenzie was avoiding me, which was no surprise either. I sat alone, playing out time, watching the grey smoke curl up the chimney.

Soon after 9 p.m. Sinclair was through; he came into the lounge with a drink in his hand. The chair Robertson had occupied was still placed opposite mine, but Sinclair ignored it and stood sipping abstractedly. At last he turned.

'What in the hell shall I do?'

'I think I would alert the police on Lewis.'

He didn't immediately reply to this, but went back to his absent-minded sipping. 'You ken – it's like this. There will never be a body. That's just the mortal cunning of it. A body goes in there at that state of the tide will shoot clean out into the Atlantic. I have had a word on the phone with the Coastguard and they can give me no hope at all. If it comes ashore it will be in Norway, and by then you could not tell it from a herring.'

'Do the statements check?'

'Ach! They may but be a lie with a multiple circumstance.'

'Still, you've got them.'

He shrugged wearily and stared scowling at the smouldering peat. 'I have to live with these people, you ken that. I cannot be marching them off by the dozen. If I prove that Iain Mackenzie is a liar I shall go near to depopulating the whole village.'

'Accessories after the fact.'

'Aye – every last one who made a false statement. And they are honest, decent enough people – what manner of justice would that be serving?' His scowl deepened. 'And if I did alert Lewis, it is ten to one that we would never take him. There are Mackenzies there and Mackenzie kin who would spirit him away, the one to the

other. And there are boats enough – aye, and ships – and just one island after another. And maybe they set him on the mainland anyway, and he is sitting now in a train, rolling down to Carlisle.'

'A general alert?'

'Ach, it is senseless. I have nine sworn statements that the laddie is dead.'

'Which you were questioning.'

'I have no good reason. The Shirra will accept them, and I am covered.' He drank deeply. 'Just look at it this way. You ken, I ken they may be lying. So there's a laddie out there now with a deed on his conscience and fear in his heart, and nowhere to go. He is dead. He cannot go home. He will never again walk his ain street. He has no papers and no identity. He is an outlaw in every land. Is not that punishment enough for the laddie, who we ken had some warrant for what he did? Would you not say it was worse than a spell in Barlinnie to be losing for ever the place of your childhood? I come from away, out of Harris, and I would not be free on such terms. I would suffer a sentence, and a long one, to set my foot in the islands again. He *may* not feel so about his town, but he may be feeling nothing at all. It is like that he is riding in the Gulf Stream between the Faeroes and Herma Ness. And we have the statements, square and clear, from men without a smirch on their record. I am thinking that justice will be served by accepting them, and I am wondering if your opinion is the same.'

I put on an owlish look. 'You wish me to give it?'

'You ken it will make my position firmer.'

I had to struggle not to smile at this shameless request for a guarantee of non-intervention. 'Sambrooke will go free?'

'Ach, yes! I will get Duggie Mackay to drop charges.'

I nodded. 'He's my only interest. What happens about Collins does not concern me.'

'But you think I am doing right?'

'I think that, in your place, I would do what you are proposing.'

'Ach, and that's enough from a man like you! And jings – you're dry – I'll ring for Robbie!'

He had no need to because, coincidentally, Robbie appeared at that moment with a tray. I would not accuse him outright of listening at the door, but he was a man who took his cues with an enviable promptness.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

EARLE ARRIVED BACK in Kyleness shortly before noon on the following day, and I postponed my departure long enough to be present at the event. I was resolved not to postpone it for longer. To a certain extent, I had been wrong about the attitude I might expect from the Mackenzies, but I thought it best to leave while the cordiality was still fresh. I had returned late from the House of Reay; I had found Iain and his father alone in the parlour. They were drinking together with a sort of quiet satisfaction and I was well enough versed in the ways of Kylie to know that their information was equal to my own. The old man greeted me with a gleam in his eye.

'Sit you by the hearth, man, and take your dram.'

I did as I was bid. There could be no question that the climate called for such fortifications. The three of us drank.

'And is Sinclair away?'

'He's away,' I said.

'He is a good man,' James Mackenzie said. 'He kens his work. Though I do not say that he is above taking hints from a better.' He glanced at Iain, who nodded gravely.

'The charges against Earle will be dropped,' I said.

'Aye – I kenned they would be. And the poor young laddie cannot answer charges. All that has been swallowed in Skoma Roast.'

'His death has been notified.'

The old man drank. 'I ken it will all go smoothly,' he said. 'At first, I thought Sinclair had some wildish notions. But if he ever did, it seems that he has dropped them.' He gave me a keen look and raised his glass slightly.

'Ach, I ken Sinclair,' Iain Mackenzie said. 'He is a man who runs away with himself at times. It was no bad luck that he had other brains by him.' He also gestured with his glass.

I drank my whisky without further comment. If the Mackenzies chose to credit me with composing the matter, I saw no reason to decline the compliment. About Verna, however, I was not mistaken. When we met at breakfast her manner was distant; I had perhaps witnessed too much concerning Verna for our acquaintance to expect a prolonged future. Our conversation was terse.

'When do you go, George?'

I told her I would go after seeing Earle.

'Don't you think that it might be better for him to find the house free of policemen?'

'He may need the support of a non-Mackenzie.'

'We are all his friends here.'

'Sometimes that can be overpowering.'

She smiled flashingly, but not quite at me.

Anne I caught by herself in the garden, where she was walking Helen in her pram. She was very nervous. I think she was expecting me to interrogate her about what she knew. Probably it was not very much. She would not have written her letter if she had been in the Mackenzies' inner council, but no doubt she had caught a hint or two and was on edge in case she should let them out. I sought to reassure her: then it was that her overriding anxiety broke through.

'Oh George – what shall I say to him?'

'You won't need to say very much.'

'I let him down. And then there's Helen.'

'I think you can leave Helen to speak for herself.'

'Oh, I've been wicked.' She turned to dab a tear. 'How I wish – how I wish that Daddy was alive!'

'Tell him you love him. That's all he wants to hear.'

'Oh George.'

We were interrupted by Verna.

When the moment came, and the Panda car bringing Earle turned crisply in at the gate, the entire household, including the domestic, were waiting in a group outside the house. I stood apart. James Mackenzie and his wife occupied the steps of the porch; Iain Mackenzie and Maisie stood on their left, with the domestic lurking behind; on their right stood Alex and Verna, supporting Anne, who was clasping Helen; I think we must have presented a formidable appearance to Earle as he climbed stiffly from the car. He paused there a moment, looking lost. He was in no better trim than when I had last seen him; the bruise under his eye had turned yellowish, and his ear was still puffy with inflammation. He came forward uncertainly. Anne was trembling; nobody seemed willing to speak a a word. Then suddenly, desperately, Anne held out Helen, who chose at that moment to utter a low cry. Earle stared at the baby and his eyes widened: he took a a quick, gulping breath.

'But honey . . . she's you!'

His lips spread in a smile and gingerly he held out his hands for Helen. Anne gave her to him; she hung on his arm.

That evening, I got as far as Stirling.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

I AM RELATING the events of nine years ago and in consequence I can add an epilogue. James Collins's death was duly registered and I believe that no more has been heard of him. I have not confirmed this: it was none of my business; neither have I been back to Kyleness. I have a memory for faces that might be stirred by some half-glimpsed Mackenzie, Macleod or Mackay. Then I would be placed in an awkward situation and perhaps find myself obliged to offend Inspector Sinclair; but I am against all forms of professional discourtesy and so I prefer not to run the risk.

Helen was christened in the kirk at Kyleness, and Earle married Anne there three weeks later. I met them afterwards in London, but in 1967 Earle accepted a post in Toronto. They flourish. Their family now is three; Helen has brothers Iain and James; they live in a charming out-of-town ranch house, of which Anne has sent me several photographs. Verna I hear of but incidentally. Verna wasted no time after Anne got married. Among the interesting people whom Alex brought down to Blockford was a retired Brigadier, an expert on the Raj. He was at that time divorcing his second wife and he felt that Verna might fill the vacancy. She felt so too. She lives now near Cheltenham in a modest country house, Pondicherry Lodge. What Alex did was much less predictable; he threw up broadcasting to study medicine. When he was qualified he spent a year doing locums and then returned, still single, to Rhodesia. He has a practice in a country district, remote from Salisbury, but in the area that his father used to police, and not very far from the plot of earth where Colin lies asleep. He and the others I hear of from Anne; she remains my only constant correspondent.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

ONE LAST NOTE, dictated by vanity. A colleague of mine is a specialist in art frauds. The other evening he came up for a drink and immediately he went to examine my watercolour.

'That's a Prout. His best period.'

I felt flattered by my own acuteness. 'What's it worth?'

'Something over five hundred.'

I didn't tell him that I'd bought it for a simple tenner.